GRACE HARLOWE'S PLEBE YEAR AT OAKDALE HIGH SCHOOL

Jessie Graham Flower

A.M.

CHS - 118 A

Merry Xmas To
Gloria
From George Jr.
Dec. 25 - 1928.

A Troop of Black-Robed Figures Were Stealthily Approaching.

Frontispiece.

Grace Harlowe's Plebe Year at High School

OR

The Merry Doings of the Oakdale Freshmen Girls

By

JESSIE GRAHAM FLOWER, A. M.

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Illustrated

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CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I.	The Accident of Friendships	7
II.	The Sponsor of the Freshman Class	19
III.	Mrs. Gray Engages a Secretary	32
IV.	The Black Monks of Asia	39
V.	Anne Has a Secret	52
VI.	The Sophomore Ball	63
VII.	All Hallowe'en	74
VIII.	Miss Leece	83
IX.	Thanksgiving Day	96
X.	Grace Keeps Her Secret	104
XI.	Mrs. Gray's Adopted Daughters	117
XII.	Miriam Plans a Revenge	127
XIII.	Christmas Holidays	137
XIV.	A Midnight Alarm	147
XV.	Tom Gray	156
XVI.	The Marionette Show	166
XVII.	After the Ball	179
XVIII.	A Winter Picnic	187
XIX.	Wolves!	196
XX.	The Gray Brothers	206
XXI.	The Lost Letter	214
XXII.	Danger Ahead	220
XXIII.	In the Thick of the Fight	229
XXIV.	The Freshman Prize	244

Grace Harlowe's Plebe Year at High School

CHAPTER I

THE ACCIDENT OF FRIENDSHIPS

"WHO is the new girl in the class?" asked Miriam Nesbit, flashing her black eyes from one schoolmate to another, as the girls assembled in the locker room of the Oakdale High School.

"Her name is Pierson; that is all I know about her," replied Nora O'Malley, gazing at her pretty Irish face in the looking glass with secret satisfaction. "She's very quiet and shy and looks as if she would weep aloud when her turn comes to recite, but I'm sure she's all right," she added good naturedly. For Nora had a charming, sunny nature, and always saw the best if there was any best to see.

"She is very bright," broke in Grace Harlowe decisively. "She went through her Latin lesson without a mistake, which is certainly more than I could do."

"Well, I don't like her," pouted Miriam. "I never trust those quiet little things. And, besides, she is the worst-dressed girl in——"

"Hush!" interrupted Jessica Bright, touching a finger to her lips. "Here she is."

A little, brown figure entered the room just as Miriam finished speaking. But Jessica was too late with her warning. The young girl had, without doubt, heard the cruel speech and her face flushed painfully as she pinned on a shabby old hat, slipped her arms into a thin black jacket and stepped out again without looking at the crowd of schoolmates who watched her silently.

"Miriam, I should think you'd learn to be more careful," exclaimed hot-tempered Nora, her soft heart touched by the appealing little stranger.

"Well, what difference does it make?" replied Miriam. "If Miss Pierson doesn't know already that she's the shabbiest girl in school, it's high time she found it out. I have a suspicion her mother takes in washing or something, and I mean to find it out right now. We can't invite a girl like that to our class parties and entertainments. She would disgrace us."

"Miriam," said Grace quietly, "I believe we are all privileged to invite whom we please to our homes. I intend to give a class tea next

Saturday, and I mean to follow Miss Pierson right now and ask her to help me receive."

The two girls looked into each other's faces for a moment without speaking. Grace was quiet and contained, Miriam flushed and furiously angry. They had been rival leaders always at the Grammar School, but the rivalry had never come to open battle until now.

Miriam was the first to drop her eyes. She did not reply, but from that moment she was the sworn enemy of Grace Harlowe and her two friends, Nora and Jessica.

"Well, we had better hurry," said Jessica, trying to calm the troubled scene. "Nobody knows exactly where Miss Pierson lives and she will be out of sight before we can catch her."

The three girls ran lightly out of the basement of the fine old building that was the pride of Oakdale. It was large and imposing, built of smooth, gray stone, with four huge columns supporting the front portico. A hundred yards away stood the companion building, the Boys' High School, exactly like the first in every respect except that a wing had been added for a gymnasium which the girls had the privilege of using on certain days. A wide campus surrounded the two buildings, shaded by elm and oak trees. Certainly no other town in the state

could boast of twin high schools as fine as these; and especially did the situation appeal to the people of Oakdale, for the ten level acres surrounding the two buildings gave ample space for the various athletic fields, and the doings of the high schools formed the very life of the place.

But we must return to our three girls who were hurrying down the shady street, followed in a more leisurely and dignified fashion by Miriam and her friends. The shabby figure of the little stranger had just turned the corner as the girls left the High School grounds.

"Come on," cried Grace breathlessly, leading the way. Having once made up her mind, she always pursued her point with a fine obstinacy regardless of opinion.

When they had come to the cross street they saw their quarry again, now making her way slowly toward the street next the river. This was the shabbiest street in Oakdale, though no one knew exactly why, since the river bank might have been the chosen site for all the handsomest buildings; but towns are as incorrigible as people, sometimes, and insist on growing one way when they should grow another, without the slightest regard for future appearances.

And so, when little Miss Pierson stopped in front of one of the smallest and meanest cottages on River Street, the girls knew she must,

indeed, be very poor. The house, small and forlorn, presented a sad countenance streaked with tear stains from a leaky gutter. An uneven pavement led to the front door, which bore a painted sign: "Plain Sewing."

They paused irresolutely at the gate, and were taking counsel together when Miriam Nesbit passed with her friends. She pointed at the door and laughed.

"Really, that girl's conduct is contemptible!" exclaimed Grace, giving the wooden gate a vigorous push. "I simply won't tolerate her rudeness. She is an unmitigated snob!" Grace knocked on the door rather sharply to emphasize her feelings. It was opened almost immediately by Miss Pierson herself, still in her hat and coat; and in her surprise and embarrassment she almost shut the door in their faces. But Jessica's gentle smile reassured her, and Grace, who was a born leader, took her hand kindly and plunged at once into the subject.

"You left school so quickly this afternoon, Miss Pierson, that I didn't have a chance to see you. I have something very particular I want to ask you to-day."

"Won't you come in?" said the other, opening the door into the parlor, which had an air of refinement about it in spite of its utter poorness.

"Anne!" called a querulous voice down the passage.

"Yes, mother, I'm coming," answered the girl, hurrying out of the room with a frightened look in her eyes. In a few moments she was back again.

"Please excuse me for leaving you," she said. "My mother is an invalid and needs my sister or me with her constantly."

"Her name is Anne, then," thought Grace. "I shall call her so at once and break the ice."

"Anne," she said aloud, "I think you know my friends, don't you—Jessica Bright and Nora O'Malley? And I am Grace Harlowe."

"Oh, yes," replied Anne, brightening at the friendly advances of the others. "I remember your names from the roll call."

"Of course," replied Grace. "But I think we should all be more to each other than roll-call acquaintances, we freshmen. I am very ambitious for our class. I want it to be the best that ever graduated from Oakdale High School, and for that reason, I think all the girls in it should try to be friends and work together to advance the cause. I'm going to start the ball rolling by giving a tea to our class next Saturday afternoon. Will you come and receive with Jessica and Nora and me?"

Anne clasped her hands delightedly for a mo-

ment. Then her eyes filled with tears and her lips trembled so that the girls were afraid she might be going to cry. Tender-hearted Jessica turned her face away for fear of showing too much sympathy.

"I'm sorry," said Anne at last, rather unsteadily, "but I am afraid I can't accept your delightful invitation. I——"

"I beg your pardon," said a voice at the door, "I didn't mean to intrude on your visitors, Anne, but I couldn't help overhearing Miss Harlowe's invitation."

A small woman, much older than Anne, but very like her in face and figure, appeared at the door.

"This is my sister," said Anne, taking the other's hand affectionately.

"Anne imagines she can't go, but she certainly can," went on the older Miss Pierson, calmly, not in the least embarrassed by the strange young girls. "Of course, she must go. I can arrange it easily."

"But, Mary——" protested Anne.

"Never mind, little sister," interrupted Mary, "it will be all right. Miss Harlowe, what time must she be there?"

"At four o'clock," answered Grace, rising to go, "and I am delighted that she can come. Remember, Anne, I'm counting on you to pour

the lemonade. The other girls are going to help with the sandwiches and ice cream. By the way," she added, as they went down the steps, "be sure and come to the basketball meeting at the gym. this afternoon."

And so it was arranged that Anne Pierson, the shabbiest and poorest girl in Oakdale High School, was to help receive at one of the prettiest and most charming houses in town. Miriam Nesbit's rudeness was to bring about a friendship between Anne Pierson and her three schoolmates that lasted a lifetime.

After the half-past two o'clock dinner, which was the universal custom in Oakdale, the chums met again at the gymnasium in the Boys' High School. Wednesdays and Saturdays were nicknamed "ladies' days" by the High School boys, for on these afternoons the girls were permitted free use of the gymnasium.

The meeting to-day was not for gymnastic exercises, however, but an important subject was to be discussed—the Freshman Basketball Team. Also the captain of the team was to be elected.

Other club meetings were in full force when the girls arrived, and the great room vibrated with the hum of voices. The three freshmen, who knew better than to interrupt sophomores and juniors at their pow-wows, made their way

quietly across the hall to the appointed place of rendezvous. Of course, the entire Freshman Class did not assemble to discuss this subject. Many members were not interested in basketball, except to look on. Girls who were overstudious, and not physically strong, could not at any rate play on the team, and therefore they seldom attended such meetings. Jessica Bright was one of these, nevertheless, she followed her two friends, who had always been foremost in athletics at the Central Grammar School.

The election of a captain was the first business of the meeting. That over, the captain, after due and serious consultation with a friendly cabinet, chose the players and their substitutes.

Undoubtedly Grace Harlowe had the coolest head in the class, and was the most to be relied upon at critical moments; yet Miriam Nesbit exerted a strange influence over her followers, who were almost her slaves. She was the richest of all the girls and wore the costliest clothes. The parties she gave, from time to time, in her mother's large and handsome home were the talk of the place. She was also the cleverest girl in the class, and had taken undisputed first place since she was a child. She was not a close student, but seemed to absorb her lessons in

half the time that it took her friends to master them. Popular she certainly was, or rather she was feared by her schoolmates. Her masterful, overpowering spirit seemed to sweep everything before it.

Grace Harlowe was quite as powerful in her way, but she had a noble, unselfish disposition and was much beloved by her friends. She stood well in her studies, but had never taken first place. Perhaps this was because she had interested herself so much in outdoor sports that she had not given enough time to study.

Both girls were handsome—Miriam tall, dark and oriental-looking, with flashing eyes and an imperious curve to her lips; Grace was also tall, with wavy, chestnut hair, fine gray eyes, regular features, a full, generous chin and cheeks glowing with health.

Miriam Nesbit had already done a good deal of lobbying when the three girls arrived on the scene. She wished to be elected captain of the team at any cost; but Grace's adherents were holding off, quietly waiting for her arrival.

"Well, here you are at last!" said Marian Barber, who had been preparing the ballots for the coming election.

Marian was the busy girl of the class, and always made herself useful.

"Is everyone here?" demanded Nora, scan-

ning the crowd of freshmen with a view to ascertaining what her chum's chances were.

"All that intend coming," replied Miriam. "The softies stayed away, as usual."

"Suppose we wait five minutes," said Grace, looking at her watch, "and then, if no one comes, we will cast the votes."

"No, no," exclaimed Miriam impatiently. "I have an engagement and can't spare any more time. I vote that we have the election at once, without waiting another moment."

"Very well, assented Grace. "I only suggested waiting because Anne Pierson promised to come, and, of course, every girl in the class has a right to vote at the class elections."

"Anne Pierson?" cried Miriam, turning crimson with suppressed rage.

"Yes," answered Grace calmly; "but, if everybody is agreeable, suppose we go ahead."

"Agreed!" cried the others and the ballots were cast.

There was not much parliamentary practice in these class elections. Each girl wrote the name of her choice on a slip of paper and dropped it in a hat. Four of the girls then counted the votes, and the one receiving the most slips was declared elected.

The slips were dropped into the hat, amid the silence of the company. Some of the sopho-

mores and juniors, perched on parallel bars, watched the scene with superior amusement, but no notice was taken of their half-whispered jeers.

The four girls then retired to count the votes.

"It's a tie," announced Marian Barber, returning presently; "a tie between Grace and Miriam. I wish some of the others would come and settle the matter."

"Here's some one," cried Nora. "Here's Anne Pierson. Let her cast the decisive vote."

Miriam's eyes blazed, but she held her peace. There was nothing to do but submit with an uneasy grace. But who could doubt what the outcome would be? However, she felt somewhat relieved when Grace said:

"I think we should cast the votes over again, and, according to the rules we made last year, Miriam and I should not vote, since the election rests between us."

The votes were cast again, Anne timidly dropping her slip in the hat with the others, and, as might have been expected, Grace was elected captain of the Freshman Basketball Team of the Oakdale High School.

CHAPTER II

THE SPONSOR OF THE FRESHMAN CLASS

"GRACE," asked Mrs. Harlowe, the day of the famous freshman tea, "have you asked some of the girls to help this afternoon? Bridget can attend to the sandwiches, but some one ought to pour the lemonade and generally look after the wants of the others."

Grace was arranging a bowl of China asters on the piano in her mother's charming drawing room. The shining mahogany chairs and tables reflected the glow of the wood fire, for the day was chilly, and bright chintz curtains at the windows gave a cheerful note of color to the scene.

"Oh, yes, mother," replied Grace. "Nora and Jessica, of course, and Anne Pierson."

"And who is Anne Pierson?"

"I don't know who she is," answered Grace. "I never knew her until she entered the High School. But she is terribly poor. Her mother is an invalid and her sister takes in plain sewing. I really asked her at first because Miriam Nesbit was rude to her one day. But I'm beginning to like her so much, now, that I'm glad

I did it. She's as quiet as a little mouse, but she is fast taking first place in class. I believe she will outstrip Miriam before the end of the year. Don't ask me who she is, though. I haven't the least idea, but she's all right, I can promise you that. I'm sorry for her because she is poor. They live in a little broken-down cottage on River Street."

Mrs. Harlowe looked dubious. Grace was always bringing home stray people and animals, and the mother was accustomed to her daughter's whims. The young girl was familiar to all the ragamuffins of the town slum, and when she sometimes found one gazing wistfully through the fence palings of her mother's old-fashioned garden, she promptly led him around to the kitchen, gave him a plate of food on the back steps, picked him a small bouquet and sent him off half-dazed with her gracious and impetuous kindness.

"Well, my dear, I shall be prepared for anything," exclaimed Mrs. Harlowe; "but remember that feeding people on the back steps and asking them into the parlor to meet your friends and acquaintances are two different matters altogether."

"Don't be afraid, mother," replied Grace. "You will like Anne as well as I do, once you get to know her. You must be careful not to

frighten her at first. She is the most timid little soul I ever met."

Just then the front gate clicked and two girls strolled up the red-brick walk, their light organdie dresses peeping out from the folds of their long capes.

"Here come Nora and Jessica," cried Grace excitedly, running to the door to meet her friends.

Mrs. Harlowe smiled. In spite of Grace's sixteen years she was still her little girl.

There was another click at the gate and Mrs. Harlowe saw through the parlor window a little, dark figure, pathetically plain in its shabby coat and hat.

"Poor little soul," thought the good woman. "How I wish I could put her into one of Grace's muslins, but, of course, I couldn't think of offering to do such a thing."

"Mother," said Grace some minutes later, when the girls had laid aside their wraps and descended into the drawing room, "this is Anne Pierson, our new friend."

Anne Pierson, small and shrinking, was dressed in a queer, old-fashioned black silk that had evidently been taken up and made short for the occasion. Mrs. Harlowe's heart was touched to the quick and she bent and kissed the young girl gently.

"How do you do, my dear?" she said kindly. "I am always glad to meet Grace's friends, and you are most welcome."

Anne was too frightened almost to speak. This was the first party she had ever attended, and the beautiful room, the girls in their light, pretty dresses, the bowls of flowers and the cheery firelight nearly stupefied her.

Mrs. Harlowe disappeared into the little conservatory off the dining room, returning in a moment with two big red roses which she pinned to Anne's dress.

"These red roses have been waiting for you all morning," she said, "and they're just in their prime now."

More guests began to arrive, and soon the room was full of young girls talking gayly together in groups or walking about, their arms around each other's waists after the manner of fifteen and sixteen.

Grace had seated Anne at the dining room table behind a large cut glass bowl which almost hid her small figure. Grace knew from experience that this would be the most popular spot in the room, and she cautioned many of her friends to be kind to the timid little stranger. She knew also that giving Anne something to keep her occupied would relieve her embarrassment. Anne conscientiously filled

and refilled the glasses, and in the intervals answered the questions put to her; but never asked any herself.

Miriam Nesbit came in late with her two most intimate friends. She wore a resplendent dress of old rose crêpe and a big black hat. Anne forgot her resentment when she caught sight of the vision and was lost in admiration. But she was brought sharply to her senses by a rude, sneering laugh from the ill-bred girl, who was staring insolently at the old black silk gown.

Anne flushed and hung her head.

"I am glad Mrs. Harlowe gave me the flowers," she thought. "They hide it a little, I think."

Meantime there was the bustle of a new and important arrival. Grace and her mother ushered in a charming little old lady and seated her in the place of honor, a big leather chair between the windows. She wore a gray silk dress and a lavender bonnet daintily trimmed in lace and white ostrich tips.

"Girls," said Grace, as a hush fell over the room, "there is no need for me to introduce any of you to Mrs. Gray, who is the sponsor for the freshman class."

There was a buzz of laughter and conversation again, and through the double doors Anne caught sight of the little old lady, talking gayly

to her subjects, seated, like a diminutive queen, on a large throne.

"Why is she the sponsor of the class?" Anne asked of Jessica, who was hovering near by.

"Oh, have you never heard?" returned Jessica. "Mrs. Gray's daughter died during her freshman year at High School, long ago, and ever since then, Mrs. Gray has offered a prize of twenty-five dollars for the girl who makes the highest average in her examinations at the end of the freshman year. She was made sponsor of the freshman class about ten years ago, so each year, soon after school opens, some one of the freshmen gives a tea and invites her to meet the new girls. You must come in and be introduced, too, as soon as you are through here."

"A prize of twenty-five dollars," repeated Anne. "How I wish I might win it!"

"It's even more than that," said Jessica. "For a perfect examination she offers one hundred dollars. But, needless to say, no one has ever won the hundred. It is considered impossible to pass a perfect examination in every subject."

"One hundred dollars!" exclaimed Anne. "Oh, if I only could!"

"Well, you may win the twenty-five dollars, anyway, Anne," said Jessica. "I suppose the

one hundred dollar prize is beyond the reach of human beings."

"And now, young ladies," Mrs. Gray was saying, smiling at the group of girls who surrounded her, as she examined them through her lorgnette, "most of you I have known since you were little tots, and your fathers and mothers before you; but I don't know which of you excels in her studies. Is it you, Grace, my dear?"

Grace shook her head vigorously.

"No, indeed, Mrs. Gray," she replied. "I could never be accused of overstudy. I suppose I'm too fond of basketball."

"It won't hurt you, my dear," said the old lady, tapping the girl indulgently with her lorgnette; "the open air is much better than that of the schoolroom, and so long as you keep up an average, I daresay you won't disappoint your mother. But none of you have told me yet who leads the freshman class in her studies."

"Miriam Nesbit," said several voices in unison.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Gray, looking intently at Miriam. "So you are the gold medal girl, Miriam? Dear me, what a young lady you are growing to be! But you must not study too hard. Don't overdo it."

Mrs. Gray had gone through this same con-

versation every year since any of the girls could remember, and never failed to caution the head girl not to overstudy.

"There's no fear of that, Mrs. Gray," replied Miriam boastfully. "My lessons give me very little trouble."

"Mrs. Gray," broke in Nora O'Malley mischievously, "Miriam Nesbit has a close second in the class. The first girl who has ever been known to come up to her."

Miriam flushed, half-angry and half-pleased at the adroit compliment.

"And who may that be, my dear?" queried Mrs. Gray, searching about the room with her nearsighted blue eyes.

"It's Anne Pierson," replied Nora.

"Pierson, Pierson?" repeated the little old lady. "Why have I not met her? I do not seem to remember the name in Oakdale. But where is this wonderful young woman who is outstripping our brilliant Miriam? I feel a great curiosity to see her."

"Anne Pierson, Anne Pierson!" called several voices, while Grace began to search through the rooms and hall.

At the first mention of her name Anne had darted from her seat behind the lemonade bowl, and rushed to the nearest shelter, which was the conservatory.

Grace found her, at last, in the conservatory crouched behind a palm.

"Come here, you foolish child!" exclaimed Grace. "You are wanted at once. Why did you run and hide? Mrs. Gray—the great Mrs. Gray—wishes to meet you. Think of that!"

Anne clasped the girl's strong hand with her two small ones.

"Oh, Grace," she whispered, "won't you excuse me? I—I——"

"You what? Silly, come right along!"

Grace fairly dragged the trembling little figure into the drawing room, where a silence had fallen over the group of young girls who watched the scene.

"Tut, tut, my dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Gray gently. "You mustn't be afraid of me. I'm the most harmless old woman in the world."

Then she tried to get a glimpse of Anne's downcast, crimson face.

"'I wanted particularly to meet you, child," went on Mrs. Gray, "because I hear you are a formidable rival of the best pupil in the freshman class. That is a great boast for your friends to make for you, my dear. Miriam Nesbit is a famously smart girl, I'm told. But I wanted to meet you, too, because you bear the name I love best in the world."

Here the old lady's voice became very soft,

and the girls suddenly remembered that the young daughter had been called Anne. Was there not a memorial window, in the chapel of the High School, of an angel carrying a lily and underneath an inscription familiar to them all: "In Memory of Anne Gray, died in her freshman year, aged sixteen"?

The girls moved off quietly, conversing in low voices, leaving Anne alone with her new friend.

"You are a very little girl to be so clever," said Mrs. Gray, patting one of Anne's small wrists as she looked into the dark eyes. "Where do you live, dear?"

"On River Street," replied Anne undergoing the scrutiny calmly, now she found herself alone.

"River Street?" repeated Mrs. Gray, trying to recall whom she had ever known living in that strange quarter of the town. "Have you been long in Oakdale?" she went on.

"A few years, ma'am," replied Anne.

"And what is your father's business, my child?" continued the old lady remorselessly.

Anne blushed and hung her head, and for a moment there was no reply to the question. Presently she drew a sharp breath as if it hurt her to make the confession.

"My father does not live here," was what she said. "My mother is an invalid. My

sister supports us with sewing. As soon as I finish in the High School, I shall teach."

Mrs. Gray put an arm around the girl's waist and drew her down beside her.

"I'm a stupid old woman, child. You must forgive me. Old people forget their manners sometimes. Will you come and see me very soon? Perhaps to-morrow after church you will take luncheon with me? I want to know you better."

She drew a card from the beaded reticule that hung at her side.

"Remember, at half-past twelve," she said, giving the girl's hand an extra squeeze as she rose to go.

After Mrs. Gray had taken her departure a free and easy atmosphere was restored and the girls began talking and laughing without the restriction of an older person's presence. Mrs. Harlowe shortly after this also left them to themselves.

"Let's do some stunts," proposed Grace. "Nora, will you give us your imitations?"

"Certainly," replied Nora, "if Miriam will promise to sing, and Jessica will do her Greek dance, and Georgie will play for us."

"All right!" came a chorus of voices.

"We've done it oft before, but we'll do it o'er again if the company so wishes," said

Georgie Pine, one of the brightest and gayest girls in the class.

The others seated themselves in a semicircle, while each girl gave her little performance, and, at the conclusion, was applauded enthusiastically. Nora had a real talent for mimicry; she convulsed her audience with imitations of some of the High School teachers. When it came Miriam's turn she sat down at the piano with a queer look on her face.

"I believe she means mischief," thought Grace to herself, as she watched the girl curiously.

Miriam ran a brilliant scale up the piano, for music was another of her many accomplishments. Then she paused and turned to the others.

"I won't sing," she said, "unless Miss Pierson promises to recite us something first, Poe's 'Raven,' for instance."

Grace flushed angrily and was about to interfere when, to her surprise, Anne herself replied:

"I shall be glad to if that is the poem you like best. I always preferred 'Annabel Lee.'"

Miriam was too amazed to answer. She could never form an idea of what it cost Anne in self-control to acquiesce; but the young girl had gained a new strength that day. So many

people had been kind to her, and what is more, interested in her welfare. She rose quietly and walked to the middle of the semicircle.

Grace and her chums were in an agony of fear lest poor Anne should break down, and so distress them all except the unkind Miriam. However, they need not have troubled themselves. Anne fixed her eyes on the far wall of the dining room and commenced to recite "The Raven" in a clear, musical voice that deepened as she repeated the stanzas. The girls forgot the shabby little figure in its ill-fitting black silk and saw only Anne's small, white face and glowing eyes. Not Miss Tebbs, herself, teacher of English and elocution at the High School, could have improved upon the performance.

"It was perfectly done," said Grace afterwards, telling the story to her mother. "It was almost uncanny and quite creepy toward the last."

When the performance was over the girls crowded around little Anne with eager congratulations; but, strange to say, everyone forgot that Miriam had given her promise to sing.

What the crestfallen Miriam kept wondering was: "Wherever did she learn to do it?"

CHAPTER III

MRS. GRAY ENGAGES A SECRETARY

GRACE and her two friends, Jessica and Nora, were also invited to Mrs. Gray's luncheon the next day, after church. Grace had often taken meals in the beautiful house on Chapel Hill, but the other girls had never been privileged to do more than sit in the large, shady parlors while their mothers paid an afternoon call.

It was with some excitement, therefore, that the three girls met in front of the Catholic Church, of which Nora was a member, and strolled up the broad street together. As they passed the little Episcopal Chapel, which had given the hill its name, Anne Pierson joined them. She looked grave and excited, and there was a feverish glow in her eyes.

"Anne, my child," exclaimed Grace, who always seemed much older than the others, "how late do you study at night? I believe you are working too hard. You look tired out."

"I'm not tired," replied Anne. "I don't mind studying. Only so much has happened in the last few days! And now we're going to luncheon with Mrs. Gray. I've seen her house.

It's very beautiful from the outside, more beautiful than the Nesbits', I think, because it is older and there is such a pretty garden at the side."

"Anne," said Jessica, "we're counting on you to win the prize. There is no reason why a rich girl like Miriam Nesbit should get it. She doesn't need the money, in the first place; and, in the second, she's already had enough glory to turn her head. Being beaten won't hurt her at all."

"I would rather win it," answered Anne, with passionate fervor, "than almost anything in the world. And think of the big prize of $100! If I could win that——" Words failed to express her enthusiasm and she paused and clasped her hands.

"Oh, well, we won't expect that of you," replied Grace, "Nobody could be expected to pass a perfect examination. That's an impossible achievement."

"*I* shall try, anyway," said Anne in a low voice.

Just then they were joined by a young man of about eighteen, who lifted his hat politely to them.

"May I walk with you?" he asked of Grace. "You seem to be going my way this morning."

"Certainly, David, we are going your way.

We are lunching with your next door neighbor, Mrs. Gray. But you must let me introduce you to Miss Pierson. Anne, this is Mr. Nesbit, Miriam's brother."

Anne flushed at the mention of Miriam's name and bowed distantly to the newcomer, who was a junior at the High School and quite grown-up to the young freshmen.

David Nesbit, like his sister, was tall, dark and handsome; but unlike her, he was quiet and unassuming. He, too, stood at the head of his classes, but he was not athletic, as Miriam was, and spent most of his time in the school laboratory, experimenting, or working at home on engines and machinery of his own contriving.

However, there was nothing snobbish in David's attitude. He greeted Anne as cordially as he had the others.

"We never see you now, David," continued Grace. "You are always so busy with your inventions and contrivances. What is the latest? A flying machine?"

"You guessed right the very first time," replied David. "It is just that."

"Really?" laughed the girls, incredulously, while Anne's eyes grew large with interest.

"Shall you fly around Oakdale in it?" asked Jessica.

"Oh, we are not building big ones yet," an-

swered David. "These are little fellows. Models, you know. The big ones may come later. Six of the junior and senior fellows have been working on them all summer. We started it in the manual training course. After we had learned to hammer things out of silver, and do wood carving and a few other little useful accomplishments, I suggested a flying machine to Professor Blitz and he fell to it like a ripe peach. It was too late to do anything last spring except talk, however. But we are almost ready now, after our labors this summer."

"Ready for what?" demanded Grace. "If you are not going to fly yourselves."

"For our exhibition. Why don't you come and see it at the gym. next Friday night?"

"We can't. We aren't invited," answered Nora, tossing back her saucy little curls.

"I'll invite you," said David. "This will admit four young ladies to the High School gym.," he continued, taking out a card and writing on it, "At 7.30 Thursday evening."

"Then everybody isn't invited?" demanded Jessica.

"No, not everybody," replied David. "Just a chosen few. And you must be sure to come, too, Miss Pierson," he added, turning to Anne, who, all this time, had been silently listening to the conversation.

"I should love to," she answered, giving him a grateful glance.

"I'll leave you here," said David, turning in at a graveled driveway that led to the Nesbit house, a very large and ornate building standing far back from the street in the midst of a well-kept lawn.

"I wish Miriam would take a few lessons in manners from her brother," murmured Grace, when they were out of hearing distance.

"He is certainly one of the nicest boys in High School," said Jessica.

"If he only played football!" said Grace, with a sigh.

"And danced," added Nora.

"I don't know how to dance, nor did I ever see a game of football," said Anne.

"Meaning that Mr. David suits you, Miss Anne," said Grace teasingly.

"It was nice of him to ask me, too," was all Anne said in reply.

"How do you do, my dears?" said Mrs. Gray, a few moments later, when John, the aged butler, ushered the girls into the long, old-fashioned parlor. "You are most kind to come and cheer up a lonely old woman. I shall expect you to be very gay and tell me all the gossip of the Oakdale High School, the four of you."

"Luncheon is served, ma'am," announced

John, whereat the sprightly old lady led the way to the dining room.

Over the delicious broiled chicken and other good things they discussed the affairs of the school, the new teacher in mathematics, Miss Leece, who was so unpopular; the girls' principal, Miss Thompson, beloved by all the pupils; the merits of the Freshman Basketball Team and a dozen other schoolgirl topics that seemed to delight the ears of Mrs. Gray.

"The truth is," she said, "I believe this freshman class is going to be one of the finest Oakdale High School has ever turned out. I have a feeling that I shall be very proud of my new girls, and at Christmas time I mean to do something I have never done before, if all goes well."

"Oh, do tell us what it is, Mrs. Gray," cried the girls in great excitement.

"I mean to celebrate with the largest Christmas party that's been given in Oakdale for many a long year. Grace, you shall manage it for me, and all of you shall help me decorate the tree and the house. We'll invite the freshmen boys and have a real dance with Ohlson's band for the music."

"Oh, oh!" cried the girls ecstatically, even quiet Anne joining in the chorus.

"By the way," went on Mrs. Gray, "do you know any girl who would like to come up and

read to me twice a week, and write my notes for me? I'm getting to be an old woman. My eyesight is growing dim. Is there any girl who would like to earn a little pocket money? But she must have a sweet, soft voice, like Anne's here."

"Anne would be the very girl herself, Mrs. Gray," suggested Grace. "She reads and recites beautifully."

"You are not sure it would trespass on your time too much, Anne?" observed the wily old lady. "I don't want to impose on you."

Anne's face fairly radiated with happiness. Could those girls possibly guess how much it meant to her to earn a little money? Five dollars was to her an enormous sum, and perhaps she might earn as much as that in time.

"Might I do it?" she exclaimed, beside herself with joy.

Grace turned her face away a moment. She felt almost ashamed of her own comfortable prosperity. And how like Mrs. Gray it was to do a kind thing in that way, as if Anne would be conferring a favor by accepting the position.

"Indeed, you might, my dear. And I feel myself lucky to get the brightest girl in her class, and maybe in Oakdale High School, to come and entertain me twice a week."

CHAPTER IV

THE BLACK MONKS OF ASIA

"WHO wants to go nutting?" demanded Grace Harlowe in the basement cloakroom a few afternoons later.

"We do," came a chorus of voices.

"I don't," answered one.

"Don't you like nutting parties, Miriam?" asked Grace.

"She's too old," put in a sophomore. "This is a young people's party, I presume?"

"Well, it's not a sophomore party, at any rate," retorted Nora.

"Ma-ma, ma-ma," cried a number of other sophomores, imitating the cries of a baby.

The freshmen were nettled by the superior attitude of the older class, but they knew better than to say anything more just then.

"Never mind, girls," said Grace in a low voice, after the sophomores had strolled away, "we'll be sophomores ourselves next year. Now, all who want to join the party, meet Nora and Jessica and me at the old Omnibus House at three-thirty. And, above all, don't give the meeting place away."

"Not in a thousand years," said Marian Barber.

It was evident that Miriam Nesbit had hoped to break up the party by declining to go herself. But she was not quite strong enough in the class to divide it utterly, and she went off in a huff, with the secret wish to take revenge on somebody. As she started up Chapel Hill to her home she was joined by one of the sophomore girls, who lived across the street.

"Your plebes are getting away from you, Miriam," exclaimed the older girl in a bantering tone. "You haven't got them well in hand yet. Nutting parties should be left behind for the Grammar School pupils."

"They certainly should," replied Miriam in a disgusted tone. "It's Grace Harlowe who gets up all these foolish children's games. She's nothing but a tomboy, anyhow."

"She's the captain of the basketball team, isn't she?" asked the other dryly.

"Yes," admitted Miriam reluctantly, "but she never would have been if she hadn't brought along all her friends to vote for her."

"Whew-w-w!" whistled the sophomore. "You don't mean to say it wasn't a fair election?"

"Oh, fair enough," said Miriam, "except that I didn't bother to bring any of my special friends, and she did. I don't call that exactly fair."

"Oh, well," consoled the other, "you have a few things coming to you anyway, Miriam. You're at the head of your class, as usual, I suppose?"

Miriam nodded her head without answering. She was thinking of little Anne Pierson and what a close race they were running together. Even studying harder than she had ever had to do before, Miriam found it difficult to keep up with Anne.

"Where are they going?" asked the other girl suddenly, after they had walked along a few minutes in silence.

"Where are who going?" asked Miriam.

"Why, the nutting party, of course."

Here was Miriam's chance for revenge. The sophomores were a famously mischievous class, and this girl was one of its ringleaders. Back in Grammar School days they had played many pranks on their school fellows, and even in their freshman year they had dared to turn off all lights, one night at a dance of older schoolmates.

"If I tell, you won't give me away, will you?" asked Miriam.

"I promise," said the older girl.

"Very well, then. They meet at three-thirty at the Omnibus House on the River road."

"Good," said the sophomore. "Don't you want to come along and see the fun?"

"Don't count on me," answered Miriam, turning in at her gate, with mixed feelings of shame and triumph.

The Omnibus House, which had been chosen by Grace as the class meeting place, was an old stone building standing in the middle of an orchard. It was now in ruins, but tradition set it down as a former inn and stage coach station built before the days of railroads, and finally burned by the Indians. There was a curious hieroglyphic sign cut in a stone slab in the front wall which one of the High School professors interested in archæology had deciphered as follows: "Peace and Justice Reign Over Mount Asia Tavern."

Here the crowd of High School "plebes," as the sophomores scornfully dubbed them, met in conclave, partly to gather nuts in the woods near by, partly to discuss class matters, but chiefly to enjoy the crisp autumn weather. The woods were still gorgeous in russets and reds, in spite of the recent heavy frosts, and there was a smell of burning leaves and dry bracken in the air. The girls skipped about like young ponies.

"If this is childish," cried Grace, "then I'd like to be a child always, for I shall play in the woods when the notion strikes me, even if I'm a grandmother.

There was a smothered snicker at this from the inside of the old stone house, but the girls were too intent on their enjoyment to notice it.

"Young ladies," exclaimed Nora O'Malley, trailing her cape after her to make her skirts look longer, and twisting her mouth down to give her face a severe expression, "you are not in your usual form to-day. I must ask for better preparation hereafter."

There was a peal of joyous laughter from the other girls.

"Miss Leece to a dot," cried Jessica.

"Miss Bright," went on Nora, "you will please pay attention to the lesson. If you do not, young woman, I shall have to punish you in the old-fashioned way."

"You will, will you?" cried Jessica, rushing gayly upon her friend. "Come on and try it then!"

The other girls followed, and there was a tussle to pull Nora down from the stone upon which she had clambered to protect herself.

Shrieks, struggles and wild laughter followed, while Nora fought desperately to hold her position. So absorbed were they in friendly battle that they had not noticed a troop of black-robed figures leaving the ruined Omnibus House and stealthily approaching.

Nora was the first to see the ominous circle.

She stopped short, and pointed with unmistakable terror at the masked and hooded persons, who were watching them silently. There was a moment of frozen horror when the girls turned around. This was a lonely spot, too remote from any dwelling to call for help. Besides, the freshmen were outnumbered by these weird figures, who appeared not unlike monks in their somber cowls, although their faces were absolutely hidden by black masks.

The girls clustered together around the rock like a group of frightened chickens. Jessica had turned pale. She was not very robust and often overtaxed her strength to keep up with her two devoted friends.

The tallest of the masked figures then spoke in a queer, deep voice.

"Young women, are you not aware that this is a sacred spot, devoted for generations past to the Black Monks of Asia, whose home this building was before it became a roadhouse for stage coaches? Never invade this spot again with your hilarity. And now we will permit you to go, marching out single file, without looking back. But first, through your leader you must give your word never to mention this meeting to anyone. If you refuse this promise we shall punish you as only the Black Monks of Asia know how to punish persons who have

offended the order. The leader will please step forward."

There was a moment's whispered conversation among the freshmen. Then Grace, urged by her friends, said:

"We promise."

"Now march out, single file, as agreed," resumed the Black Monk of Asia, his voice trembling a little with suppressed emotion of some sort.

The girls started to move out of the enclosure single file, Grace leading the procession, when a gust of wind blew the robe of the leading monk apart, disclosing a navy blue serge walking-skirt. Grace's quick eye caught sight of the skirt at once, and breaking from the line, she charged straight into the group of black monks, crying:

"Sophomores! Sophomores!"

The other girls ran after her, screaming at the tops of their voices; and there might have been almost a free fight between the two classes had not the Black Monks of Asia scattered in every direction, running at utmost speed.

"Come on back, girls," cried Grace in a disgusted tone.

She had chased a monk half-way across the orchard; then stopped to wonder what she would do if she caught the tall, black-robed in-

dividual who had indecorously caught up her skirts and was flying well ahead over the rough ground.

One by one the plebes returned to their meeting place.

"Well, that was a sell!" uttered Nora disgustedly. "How shall we ever manage to get even with those mean sophomores?"

"If we don't," exclaimed Grace, "we shall never hear the last of it in Oakdale."

"But who gave us away?" demanded Jessica. "Did anyone drop a hint to the sophomores of our secret meeting place?"

"I didn't," said one girl after another.

"Perhaps they followed us," suggested Marian Barber.

"No one followed me," asserted Grace. "I was careful to look behind and see."

"Nor me."

"Nor me," exclaimed several of her classmates.

"No," said Nora. "Somebody must have overheard and given the secret away."

"Not Mi——" but Grace stopped before she had finished the name.

The girls looked at each other.

Could Miriam Nesbit have been so false to her class?

No one replied, but each made a secret reso-

lution to ferret out Miriam's suspected treachery if it were the last act of her life.

"Let's start home, now," said Grace. "It's too late to go nutting anyhow, and these foolish sophomores have spoiled the afternoon, for me at least. If we don't cook up something to pay them back, the name of freshman will be disgraced forever more."

However, the afternoon adventures were not at an end.

As the group of girls started toward the road, some distance away, trying not to look crestfallen, a gruff voice from the far side of the Omnibus House called:

"Hold up there!"

The girls took no notice, thinking it was more upper-class tricks.

Five rough-looking men emerged from a grove of alders which grew about the building.

The young girls were really frightened this time. No sophomore could disguise herself like this. These were undoubtedly genuine ruffians of the worst type, hungry, blear-eyed and ragged.

"What shall we do?" whispered Jessica, clinging to Grace desperately.

"Everybody run," answered her friend, trying to be calm as the five men advanced on them. But when they broke away to run toward the

distant road they found their retreat cut off by the tramps, who were active enough as soon as the girls showed signs of flight. Back of them lay the dense woods into which the sophomores must have plunged and departed for town by another road. Seeing that escape was impossible, since, if some got away, others would be caught—and no girl was willing to desert her friends—the frightened plebes paused again and clustered about their leader.

"What do you want?" asked Grace of one of the men.

"First your money, then your jewelry," answered the tramp, insolently leering at her.

"But suppose we havn't any money or jewelry?" replied Grace.

"So much the worse for you, then," answered the tramp in a threatening tone.

"He can have this gold bracelet," exclaimed Jessica, slipping the band from her arm.

But Grace was not listening. Her attention was absorbed by a group of people passing in a straggling line on the road. Lifting up her voice she gave the High School yell, which had been familiar to every High School boy and girl for the last twenty years:

"Hi-hi-hi; hi-hi-hi; Oakdale, Oakdale, HIGH SCHOOL!"

As she expected, the call was answered im-

mediately, and some of the loiterers along the highway vaulted the fence at one bound.

"Help!" cried all the girls in chorus. "Help! Help!"

"It's some of the High School boys!" exclaimed Nora, in a relieved voice as the rescuers came bounding through the orchard.

The tramps looked irresolute for a moment, but when they saw that the newcomers were five boys they held their ground.

"What do you want?" said the tallest boy, with a flaming head of red hair, as he confronted one of the tramps.

"Thank heaven it's Reddy Brooks, pitcher on the sophomore baseball team!" whispered Grace, unable to conceal her joy.

"Is that any of your business, young man?" demanded the tramp, showing his teeth like an angry dog.

"It's my business to protect these young ladies," answered Reddy Brooks, "and I'll do it if I have to shed somebody's blood in the attempt."

"Ho, ho, ho!" laughed the big tramp, clapping his hands to his sides and almost dancing a jig in his amusement.

In the meantime Reddy had cast his eyes about for some kind of a weapon. There was not a stick nor stone in sight. The only thing

he could find was a pile of winter apples that had evidently been collected by the owner of the orchard to be barreled next day.

Reddy made a rush for the pile, to the amazement of his fellow-students, who imagined for a moment that he was running away. They soon found out his purpose, however, when the apples came whizzing through the air with well-aimed precision.

The first one hit the biggest tramp squarely on the chin and almost stunned him. Each boy then chose his man and the five ruffians were soon running across the orchard to the wood, the boys after them, their pockets bulging with apples. Laughing and yelling like wild Indians, they pelted their victims until the men disappeared in the forest.

The girls, who had forgotten their fright in the excitement of the chase, were laughing, too, and urging on the attacks exactly as they would have done at one of the college football games. Perhaps they had had a narrow escape, but it was great fun, now, especially when Reddy Brooks threw one of his famous curved balls and hit a tramp plump on the back of the head.

"Oh," cried Nora, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes, "I never had such a good time in all my life! Wasn't it great?"

"Wasn't it though?" grinned Reddy, as the

boys returned from the field of victory. "Lots more fun than throwing balls at dummies at the county fair, wasn't it, fellows?"

"You girls ought to be careful how you walk out here alone at this time of the year," said Jimmie Burke. "There are a great many tramps around now, going south in bunches to spend the winter in Palm Beach, no doubt."

"We'll never do it again," answered Grace.

"Never again!" exclaimed Nora, raising her right hand to heaven.

"I suppose Farmer Smithson will wonder what became of his apples," observed Reddy.

"Oh, well, he has so many acres of orchards, I don't suppose he'll miss this one little pile."

And the crowd started gayly off to town.

But the girls of the freshman class had not forgotten—or forgiven—the Black Monks of Asia.

All along the walk Grace was turning over and over in her mind some scheme of revenge. Nothing seemed feasible, however. The sophomores were so well up in tricks that it would be difficult to deceive them.

"Suppose," Grace proposed suddenly, aloud, "we ask David Nesbit's advice to-morrow night, when we go to the flying machine exhibition."

After that she dismissed the subject from her mind for the time being.

CHAPTER V

ANNE HAS A SECRET

ON the night of the flying machine exhibition, the four chums, for Anne had now been formally adopted by Grace and her friends, arrived somewhat early at the great arched doorway leading into the gymnasium.

They were all somewhat excited over this new experience. There had been many balloon ascensions at the State Fair, and once a dirigible airship had sailed over the town of Oakdale. But to see a real flying machine with all its grace and elegance and lightness was like stepping onto another planet where progress had advanced much faster than it had on this.

At least, so thought Anne as she followed her friends into the building. There was a sound of puffing and churning, during which David arrived in a cloud of smoke on his motor cycle.

"I mean to learn to ride one of those queer machines," exclaimed Grace from the doorway, never dreaming what an important part that very machine was one day to play in the history of Oakdale.

"All right, you're welcome to," replied

David, jumping off as he stopped the motor. "Come over to the campus to-morrow afternoon, and I'll give you your first lesson."

"Is that really an invitation?" asked Grace. "For I shall accept it, if it is."

"It certainly is," answered the young man, "and I shall expect you to make a very excellent prize pupil, not like Reddy Brooks, who tumbled off and smashed his nose because he suddenly forgot how to manage the brakes."

A few other people gathered in the roomy gymnasium to see the exhibition, but the girls could see that it was a very exclusive company they had been invited to join. There were, in fact, no other girls, except Miriam Nesbit, who came late with her mother, a handsome, quiet woman to whom her son David bore a marked resemblance.

Grace and her friends spoke to Mrs. Nesbit cordially, while Miriam bowed coldly and confined all her attentions to Miss Leece, the unpopular teacher of mathematics. Miriam ignored Anne entirely.

"And now, ladies, if you will all be seated, the show will begin," announced David, leading them to the spectators' benches ranged against the wall. "Don't expect anything wonderful of mine," he added. "It's only in the first stages so far. I'm afraid she'll break down,

but she's a great little machine, just the same. Isn't she, mother?"

"She is wonderful, I think, David," replied Mrs. Nesbit, who was a very shy, quiet woman, almost entirely wrapped up in her only son. Miriam had always been too much for her, and she had long since given up attempting to rule or direct her brilliant, willful daughter.

"Mrs. Nesbit," said Grace, "this is Anne Pierson, one of the brightest girls in the freshman class."

"How do you do?" said Mrs. Nesbit cordially, giving the girl her hand. "You are a newcomer, are you not? I haven't heard Miriam speak of you."

"She is a newcomer, mother, but I hear she's giving your daughter Miriam a stiff pull for first place," said David teasingly.

"I wish you'd keep quiet, David," exclaimed his sister angrily. "You always talk too much."

"Miriam!" remonstrated her mother.

"Miss Nesbit," said Miss Leece in a disagreeable, harsh voice, "will have no trouble, I think, in holding her own."

The teacher gave Anne such a glare from her pale blue eyes that the poor child shrank behind Grace in embarrassment.

"Dear, dear," murmured Mrs. Nesbit help-

lessly. She disliked exceedingly the scenes to which her daughter often subjected the family.

David only laughed good-naturedly.

"The exhibition is about to begin," he said, and disappeared into the room where the ships were to be put through their performances.

In a few moments six young airship builders appeared, each carrying in his arms the result of his summer's labors. There was vigorous applause from everybody except Miriam, who was too angry with her brother to enjoy the spectacle.

The aeroplanes were all copies of well-known models, except David's, which was of an entirely new and original design of his own invention. It looked something like a flying fish, the girls thought, with its slender, oblong body, gauzy fins at the sides and a funny little forked tail at the stern.

The models were too light for machinery, so rubber bands, secured cris-cross in the bows, when suddenly released with a snap gave the little ships the impetus they needed to fly the length of the gymnasium.

Only four of the six, however, were destined to fly that evening. They soared straight down the big room, as easily and gracefully as great white birds, and dropped gently when they hit the curtain at the other end, their builders run-

ning after them as eagerly as boys sailing kites. One of the models fluttered and settled down before it reached the other side, and David's machine, which had commanded most attention because it was different, started out bravely enough, its little propeller making a busy humming as it skimmed along. But it had gone hardly ten yards before it collapsed and ignominiously crashed to the floor.

"I'm glad of it," said Miriam above the din, for everyone had gathered about the young man to offer sympathy and congratulations at the same time.

"It's very, very clever, my boy," said Professor Blitz, "and you'll succeed yet, if you keep at it."

"She wouldn't go far, David," said Grace, stroking the little model, as if it had been a pet dog, "but she's the prettiest of all, just the same."

"Did it hurt it when it fell?" Anne asked him.

"I think it broke one of its little fins," laughed David. "It hurt me much more than itself, because it wouldn't be good and fly all the way."

"Anne," called Grace, "here is some one looking for you. It's a boy with a note."

Anne looked frightened as she opened a soiled looking envelope the boy handed her.

"Is anything the matter?" asked Jessica, seeing the expression of fear on her face.

"No—yes——," answered poor little Anne, undecidedly. "I must go home, or rather I mustn't go the way I came. Don't you think I could leave at a side entrance? I don't want to see the person who is waiting for me in front."

"Of course, child," spoke up Grace. "We'll see you home ourselves. Won't we, girls?"

"Wait until I lock up my motor cycle and I'll go along," called David. "We'll all protect Miss Anne."

"Tell him," said Anne to the boy, putting the note back in the envelope and giving it to him, "that what he asks is impossible."

"Couldn't you squeeze us into the carriage, mother?" asked David, returning presently with his hat.

"I have invited Miss Leece to drive home with us, mother," interrupted Miriam, giving her brother a blighting glance. "There is room for only one more person. Perhaps Jessica will take it."

"You are very kind," said Jessica coldly, "but I prefer to walk with the girls."

"*You'd* better walk, too, cross-patch, and learn a few manners from your friends," was David's parting advice to his sister.

"Children, children!" exclaimed Mrs. Nesbit, " don't, I beg of you, quarrel in public."

Presently the five young people had slipped out of a side door of the gymnasium and started down a back street in the direction of Anne's house. They had not gone far, however, before they became aware that they were being followed. Grace was the first to call the attention of Nora and Jessica to a long, slim figure stealing after them in the shadows.

"Here he comes," whispered Jessica. "What in the world do you suppose he wants with our poor little Anne?"

"I believe he's going to stop us," returned Grace. "He is coming nearer and nearer."

"Anne, I command you to wait!" called a voice from behind them.

They all stopped suddenly and Anne jumped as though she had received a shock.

A tall, theatrical-looking individual had come up to them. He wore a shabby frock coat and a black slouch hat, which he raised with an elaborate flourish when he saw the young girls.

"Pardon me, ladies," he said, "but I wish to speak with my daughter."

Anne controlled herself with an effort.

"I cannot see you now, father," she said. "It is quite late and I must get back."

"You shall not only speak to me but you shall

come with me," exclaimed the man, with a sudden flare of anger. "I will not submit to disobedience again. Come at once!"

"Father, I cannot go with you," cried Anne, clinging to her friends. "I would rather be with mother and Mary. They need me more than you do and I want to go to school and study to be a teacher."

The man was now beside himself with theatrical rage.

"Miserable child!" he cried, waving his arms wildly. "I shall take you if I must by force." Breaking through the group, he seized the hand of his daughter and dragged her after him.

"Oh, save me!" cried the poor girl, struggling to release herself.

"I can't stand this! If she doesn't want to go with him, she shan't, father or no father," growled David, dashing after the pair.

"Stop, sir!" he cried, seizing Anne's other hand. "I must ask you to release this young lady at once."

"Insolent boy!" cried the other, giving each word an oratorical flourish, "are you not aware that this young lady, as you call her, is merely a child, and that she happens to be my daughter? I cannot see that you have a right to interfere in a family matter."

"But I have no proof that Miss Pierson is your daughter," retorted David. "It is enough that she doesn't want to go with you. I undertook to see her safely to her own home, this evening, and I mean to do it. After that you may settle your difficulties as you please."

"Miserable upstart!" cried the man, now so thoroughly angry that he let go Anne's hand, "I have a good mind to give you what you deserve. As for you, undutiful, wretched girl," he added, his voice rising to an emotional tremolo, "you shall be well punished for this!"

"Don't wait," whispered Anne. "If we run, we can get away, now, while he is so angry." At that they all took to their heels, David following after them, much relieved to have given Anne's father the slip without further disagreeable argument.

No one spoke until they had reached the Pierson cottage and had seen Anne safely to the front door.

"I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed at last, trying not to cry. "I wouldn't for anything have had it happen, and just when you were all beginning to like me a little. Will you forgive me?"

"Forgive you, Anne?" cried Grace. "It wasn't your fault. We are only awfully sorry for you."

"We will just forget all about it, and never

speak of it to anyone," promised Jessica, taking the girl's hand kindly.

"But I want you to understand that I was right in not going," protested Anne. "Some day I will explain."

"Of course you were right," said David, "and I hope you will never be persuaded to go."

"Thank you, all, a thousand times!" came gratefully from Anne; "and good night." Then she disappeared into the cottage.

"Well, this was a night's adventure," observed Grace, as they started homeward.

"I am afraid Anne's father is a night's adventurer," muttered David. "He looks mightily like one of those strolling actors who go barnstorming through country towns."

"Poor Anne! Do you suppose he wants her to barnstorm?" asked Nora.

"I haven't a doubt of it," replied the young man. "I think you girls had better adopt that poor child and look after her."

"We have already," answered Grace. "Didn't Miriam tell you about it?"

"Miriam? No; she never tells me anything. Besides, what has she to do with it?"

The girls were silent.

"By the way," continued Grace, "speaking of barnstorming, we want to ask your advice,

David. The sophomores played a mean trick on us the other day at the old Omnibus House."

"I heard something about the Black Monks of Asia," answered David, laughing.

"Can't your inventive brain devise a scheme of revenge?" went on Grace. "If we don't get even with them soon, the story will be all over town."

"Well," replied David, "I can tell you a secret I happened to have overheard when one of the sophomores was calling on Miriam. I was an eavesdropper entirely by accident, but what I heard might help some. The sophomores are going to give an initiation mask ball a week from Saturday night. Only the class and a few outsiders, among them Miriam, are to be present. Everybody is to be in fancy dress, and disguised out of all recognition. Can't you work up a scheme with that to go upon, girls?"

"We certainly can," cried Nora. "It's the chance of a lifetime."

"Just wait and see!" exclaimed Grace.

"By the way, David, you didn't happen to overhear the password, did you?" asked Jessica.

"I did," he replied. "Nothing escaped me, for I was caught in a trap. You know I don't care for that large, husky young damsel who

leads the sophomores, and if I had made my presence behind the screen known, I should have had to speak to her. So I just sat still and said nothing. The password is 'Asia.' "

"They are trying to rub it in, I suppose," cried Grace. "But I think they won't be so ready to use that word after their old ball is over."

"If you want any help," offered David as he left Grace at her front door, "you know where to come for it, don't you?"

"You're a true brick, David!" said Grace. "Good night."

CHAPTER VI

THE SOPHOMORE BALL

THERE was an undercurrent of excitement in the air on the day of the sophomore ball.

The sophomores themselves were full of secrets, whispering around in groups, their faces grave with self-important expressions. This was to be their annual Initiation Ball, and many new members, after receiving initiation into the various sophomore societies, were to be invited to the gymnasium, which had been turned over to the class for the evening.

There was no end to the fun of these balls, according to feminine gossip, for no male was ever admitted and only three invitations were issued to girls of other classes. It was, in fact, to be nothing but fun and frolic, and every costume had been planned weeks ahead.

One teacher was asked to be present to keep order in case of intrusion, for the gymnasium door, on that famous night, was always besieged by youths from the Boys' High School, who roared and jeered as each cloaked and masked figure rushed under the archway and disappeared.

The freshmen, all through the day, were unusually quiet. They kept to themselves and had little to say. Miriam and her three particular friends were carefully avoided by their classmates. Miriam, herself, felt the snub at once. Had she, after all, made a mistake, and was she losing ground in the class? But her vanity was like a life buoy to her sinking hopes. She refused to see that the other girls regarded her with growing dislike.

When school was over, that afternoon, six girls strolled down the High School walk arm in arm. They were Grace and her three chums and two other girls who were popular in the freshman class.

Anne's small figure seemed almost dwarfed

next to Grace, who towered half a foot above her. Ever since Anne's trying scene with her father, Grace had been doubly tender and kind to her, until the young girl seemed to expand under the happy influence.

"Well, girlies, dear, we are the chosen six. I hope we shall be a credit to the class."

"Don't talk so loudly, Nora. I feel as if we were surrounded by spies to-day. Everybody has been so mysterious and queer."

"One thing is practically certain," whispered Grace: "I believe it was Miriam who told the sophomores about the Omnibus House. Why else did they invite her to their ball?"

"We can never prove it, though," said one of the others, "unless we get her up a tree some day and make her admit it."

"Remember, Anne," cautioned Grace, when they came to the cross street leading to the Pierson cottage, "eight o'clock sharp at my house! And don't bother about things. We shall have more than enough among us."

At half-past eight that night the sound of a stringed orchestra floated out on the breeze as the door of the gymnasium swung back and forth to admit disguised sophomores, who each whispered the countersign to the doorkeeper, after running the gauntlet of the waiting crowd, and slipped in.

The music was furnished by a troupe of women players especially engaged to play in this Adamless Eden. What would not the crowd of waiting boys have given for one glimpse of the ball room, where ballet girls, clowns and courtiers, Egyptian snake charmers, Mephistopholeses and Marguerites, priests and priestesses of the Orient, all whirled madly together?

Every door had been locked and bolted and every downstairs window securely closed. Ventilation was obtained through the half-open windows opening on the upper gallery, which ran around the four sides of the gymnasium. The doors to this gallery had also been locked and the only way to reach it was by steps leading up from the gymnasium.

Six masked and hooded figures swung down High School Street together, talking and laughing in low voices. The smallest of the six appeared to stumble over her feet, and once tumbled in the road. Her friends gayly helped her up, when it was disclosed that she wore a pair of boy's shoes much too large for her.

"If we don't break our necks stumbling over these brogans," whispered the tallest girl, "we'll be lucky."

As a matter of fact, each one of the six maskers was wearing a pair of men's shoes.

"I stuffed my toes with cotton," laughed another, "but even now they are hard to manage."

Just then a motor cycle shot past them, slowed down and stopped altogether.

The rider rested it against a tree and came back.

"I recognized you by your big feet," he said in a whisper. "Grace, here's the duplicate key to the laboratory. I had some trouble getting it, but no one knows, and you'll be safe enough. I'll let myself in with the other duplicate key and lock the door. They will be sure to try it at intervals. If you get into any trouble, early in the evening, make a dash for the steps and blow your horn loud. Now, that's all, I think. I'll be hidden in the laboratory until my turn comes. Good-bye and good luck!"

In another instant he was off on his motor cycle.

Six figures, well disguised in dominoes of as many hues, presently appeared on the ball room floor, just in time for the grand march. It was a pity no one, except the lone teacher, was permitted to look at the brilliant picture. But such was the tradition of the class. After the march, ten ballet girls in tarlatan skirts, their faces concealed by little black satin masks, gave a performance. Following this, a Spanish

dancer, whom the six dominoes recognized at once as the treacherous Miriam Nesbit, gave an exhibition of her skill.

"I'm going to have some fun with her," whispered the blue domino to the red one. "Just follow me and see."

The last speaker joined the dancer as the music struck up a waltz.

"That was a good day's work you did for our class, not long ago," she whispered as they danced off together.

"What do you mean?" asked the Spanish dancer.

"I mean the Black Monks of Asia. Now, do you understand?"

"But I thought it was not to be told," exclaimed the dancer, flushing under her mask.

"Only to the committee so that you might be rewarded with an invitation," whispered the domino, as she slipped away.

"*She* did confess it, and every freshman in the class shall know it to-morrow!" the emissary exclaimed privately to her friend, the red domino.

"In spite of what her brother is doing for us to-night?" returned the red domino.

"You are quite right, child. I never thought of that. Perhaps that is the very reason he is helping us get even to-night."

"I think it is," added the other, quietly.

"Girls, we must hurry up and begin," whispered another of the six dominoes. "They are all going to unmask at half-past ten."

So the unrecognized intruders slipped away, stationing themselves about the room.

Pretty soon a rumor began to spread among the dancers that there were young men present. No one knew exactly how it started, but it grew and spread with such persistency that it finally reached the ears of the chaperon.

"Some of the girls saw their feet," said her informant, "and not only their feet but their trousers, too."

The teacher rose and rapped sharply for order.

"Young ladies," she called in a loud voice, "I am sorry to disturb the dancers, but we have every reason to believe there are some men in the room. Since it is not yet time for you to unmask, it will be simple to find out who does not belong here by having you file past me. I will lift each mask myself."

The dancers accordingly arranged themselves in a long line and walked single file past the teacher. She saw only girl's faces, however, as she peeped under the masks, and the dance proceeded.

The next disturbance came when the maskers

had all taken their stand at one end of the room at the request of the six dominoes, who managed to whisper to each sophomore that there was presently to be a surprise.

An expectant hush fell over the company as the six dominoes filed out of a side room and stood, for a moment, in full view of the sophomores. Then the six deliberately lifted their dominoes, disclosing trouser legs and men's shoes. Instantly the place was in pandemonium; yet before the sophomores could rush upon the intruders six long horns were blown in unison, and immediately the lights went out. In the darkness the six dominoes made for the stairs, rushed along the gallery, and were admitted to the laboratory by the duplicate key. But, just before the blue domino disappeared, she called out in a loud voice from the gallery:

"The freshmen are avenged!"

When the doors were safely closed the lights were turned on again, disclosing the sophomores blinking foolishly at each other after the sudden startling change from darkness to light.

"They are in the laboratory!" cried one. "Let's cut off their escape!"

The angry sophomores made a rush for the door.

"Hurry girls!" urged David, who had just

returned to the laboratory after manipulating the lights. "They'll catch us before we know it."

But the young fugitives were too late. Just then there was the sound of many feet running up the stairs from the other door.

"How about one of the gallery doors?" asked Grace.

"They are all locked," answered David. "There only remain the skylight trap-door and the roof. Do you think you could manage it if I helped you?"

"Of course; we could manage anything," protested the freshmen girls.

It was an easy matter to climb up the ladder, and clamber through the trap-door on to the roof.

"We're just in time," whispered David. "They have found the right key to the gallery door, and they'll be coming in both ways. Crawl carefully now, girls, for heaven's sake, and don't slip!"

The seven young people began slowly to draw themselves along the gymnasium roof on their hands and knees. Fortunately, it was not a very sloping roof, and their only danger lay in their movements being heard from below. Meanwhile the gymnasium had emptied itself, and parties of enraged sophomores were en-

gaged in searching the adjoining class rooms and passages.

"Let's surround the building on the outside," cried one of the class leaders. "They can't escape, then, by any of the fire escapes, and we are sure to catch them!"

In a few moments, David peeping over the edge of the roof, saw figures stationed at every possible exit, waiting patiently.

"Lie low," he whispered, "and crawl on your stomachs, or you're surely caught."

Soon after the seven had reached the end of the hundred feet of gymnasium, where their flight was stopped short by a blank wall where the gymnasium joined the High School building.

"Here's a pretty pass," whispered David. "I forgot about this old school wall. The only thing to do, now, is to hide behind this chimney and wait for the row to quiet down."

There they lay, as flat as possible, listening with bated breath to the sophomores below. Presently there was a sound of footsteps on the gymnasium roof and they heard Miriam's voice saying:

"They must have escaped through the trapdoor in the laboratory and come along here. Wait a minute, girls, and I'll see."

"O Grace, we're caught!" groaned Jessica. "What shall we do?"

"No we aren't yet," answered Grace. "Especially if she is coming alone, and that is what I am praying for."

"I'll come with you, Miriam," called the voice of the sophomore leader.

"Why don't you take the other side?" proposed Miriam. "And I'll go around and meet you."

"Very well," came the answer.

The freshmen clutched each other and waited.

Miriam ran lightly along the roof, and came upon the seven prostrate figures so suddenly that she almost lost her balance.

"Don't speak," said Grace, in a distinct whisper, "and don't give us away. If you do, you will regret it. Remember the blue domino who waltzed with you!"

She hoped Miriam would understand what she meant and so save her from further explanation. In this Grace was right. Miriam was trapped at last. She deliberately turned and walked away without a word.

"Come on, girls," they heard her call to the others, "let's waste no more time on them." When all was quiet the seven intriguers slipped down the fire escape and disappeared in the darkness—safely escaping discovery.

CHAPTER VII

ALL HALLOWE'EN

"ANNE," called a chorus of boys' and girls' voices, "come out and have some fun. Have you forgotten it's Hallowe'en?"

The door of the Pierson cottage opened and Anne appeared on the threshhold.

"I can't," she answered; "I must study to-night."

"Oh, bother lessons!" exclaimed Grace Harlowe. "Skip them, for once, and join the crowd. We are going Hallowe'ening. Mother allowed it because David Nesbit and Reddy Brooks are along to look after us."

Anne looked longingly at the little company.

"I'll come," she sighed, "although it was my algebra I was working on. You know Miss Leece hates me, and, if I slip up, she'll be much harder than any of the other teachers."

"Hang Miss Leece!" said David promptly.

"Well, let's hang her, then," exclaimed Nora. "Let's dress her up and hang her on a limb of a tree."

"What do you mean by 'hang' her?" asked Grace, while Anne went in to put on her hat and coat.

"Don't you know?" replied Nora. "You stuff an old dress full of hay and paper, make a head out of any old thing, put a hat on it, and there you have her mighty fine."

"That's an old stunt, Nora," observed David. "Let's have something more improved and up-to-date. Suppose, for instance, we use Marian's Jack-o'-lantern for the head. I'll put some little electric bulbs in the eye holes and attach them to a battery so that we can turn her eyes off and on. And we'll ride her on a broomstick in good style."

"Only, nobody must know it's Miss Leece whose being effigied," urged Grace. "This must be merely for our own private satisfaction. Everybody promise not to tell."

Everybody promised; so, with Anne safely in tow, they started for Jessica's house to make the figure. Here they were not likely to be interrupted. Jessica's mother was dead and her father spent most of his evenings in his library.

Half a broomstick, with a small pumpkin attached to one end, formed the framework of Miss Leece's effigy. A cross beam gave a human touch to the shoulders and with the skeleton ready, the business of stuffing an old ulster and hanging it over the figure was simple. Tiny electric bulbs were placed in the eyes and a bon-

net tied on the head with a green veil floating behind. Miss Leece, Nora insisted, always wore one growing out of her left ear. There was nothing left to do now, but to place the figure in a legless chair that had been nailed to two poles, and the procession was ready.

"She's a very fine lady," cried Grace, running ahead to get the effect of the absurd lopsided figure whose eyes glared and went out alternately. "I wish the real Miss L. could see herself now. She would know exactly what she looks like when she glares at poor little Anne in class."

"Yes, Anne," said David, " this shall be your party. We are going to give you satisfaction for your wrongs in the only way that lies in our power."

"Oh, I don't really mind her," replied Anne, "only I'm afraid she'll catch me unprepared, some day, and then I *will* get it in earnest."

"It's a perfect outrage," exclaimed Grace. "Miss Leece is so cruel to little Anne, David, that it makes my blood boil. I sometimes think she is trying to make Anne lose the freshman prize."

"The old Hessian!" cried David, who was on a sort of rampage that evening. "What shall I do to her, Anne? Give her an electric shock?" and he pressed the electric button rap-

idly up and down, which made the eyes glare hideously and go out several times in succession.

In a town the size of Oakdale strolling parties of boys and girls, on Hallowe'en night, made a not unsual sight, so when our young people paraded boldly down the main street, singing and blowing horns, nothing was thought of it. What they were doing might be considered exceedingly out of place by a few straightlaced persons, but boys and girls will have their fun, even if it must sometimes be at the expense of other people.

Certainly Miss Leece was the most unpopular teacher ever employed in the High School as far back as memory could reach. She was cruel, strict and sharp-tongued. Often her violent, unrestrained temper got the better of her in the class room; then she gave an exhibition that was not good for young girls to see. Anne, especially, was the victim of her rages—poor little Anne who never missed a lesson and studied twice as hard as the other girls. Miss Leece had but one weakness, apparently, and that was Miriam Nesbit.

Twice had the faculty convened in secret session to consider Miss Leece's case, but it had been decided to keep her through the year at least, since she was engaged by contract and

was moreover an excellent instructor in mathematics.

So, it was no wonder that even this early in the school year, she was the object of dislike to the High School girls. But could our girls have foreseen what the evening's fun would bring forth, they would never have been so reckless in carrying the effigy about town.

"Suppose we take her across the square," cried Reddy; "then over the bridge to the old graveyard and hang her on the limb of the apple tree just outside the wall?"

Off they started, singing at the tops of their voices:

Hang a mean teacher on a sour apple tree,
Hang a mean teacher on a sour apple tree.

When they reached the center of the public square, where a big electric light shed its rays, who should spring out of the shadows, from nowhere apparently, but Miss Leece herself? Nothing escaped her sharp ears and her cold blue eyes; neither words of the song nor the figure in detail, green veil and all; nor Anne Pierson, who happened to be standing quite near the effigy at the moment.

And what was worse, and still more incriminating to the guilty merrymakers, the moment they caught sight of her they stopped singing.

The eyes in the pumpkin suddenly lost their glare, and a silent procession wound its way hurriedly from the square.

"Good heavens!" cried Grace. "Why did we stop the song? If we had only gone right ahead, it wouldn't have looked half as bad."

"It was a mistake," admitted David, gravely, "especially as she seemed to have seen Anne first of all. Anne, if she walks into you to-morrow morning, you can just lay the blame on me, do you hear? I got up the whole party and I'm willing to stand for it."

"No, no," cried Anne. "That wouldn't be fair, David. I couldn't think of doing that."

"Well, you are not to get the blame, at any rate," said David, "if I have to go up and make a confession to the principal herself."

"Let's go and hang her now, anyhow," cried Reddy. "We'll take no half-way measures with old Queen Bess."

But somehow the spice of the adventure seemed to have gone out of it.

"It really would be dangerous now," said Grace. "She would be certain to hear of it and make it worse for all of us."

"Why not burn her," put in Nora, who was afraid of nothing and had often looked at the scolding teacher with such cold, laughing eyes, that even Miss Leece was disconcerted.

"Good!" cried several of the others. "We will take her down below the bridge and burn her as a witch."

No one objected to this, since the ashes of the effigy would tell no tales. Once more they started singing: "Merrily we roll along!" as they marched out of the village, crossed the bridge over the little river and finally paused on the bank below.

"Plant the pole in deep," said David, "so she won't topple, and fix her up to suit yourselves, girls, while we get the fagots."

The boys began to search about for dried sticks and twigs, while the girls were arranging the figure for her funeral pyre.

Suddenly, there was a wild war whoop. A crowd of boys dashed out of a thicket near by, each one carrying a lighted Jack-o'-lantern on top of a pole, and surrounded the effigy of the teacher.

"Help!" cried the girls, trying to defend the absurd thing from the attack, but they were too late. One of the boys seized the pole and rushed off in the darkness.

Miss Leece, in effigy, had been kidnapped in an instant, before David and his friends had had time to realize what had happened.

"Which way did they go?" he asked breathlessly.

"Through the thicket," cried Grace.

And the whole crowd dashed after the kidnappers. It was great fun for everybody except Anne, who was too tired to keep up the chase for long, and was soon lagging behind the others. David saw her and turned back.

"You are too little for all this junketing, Anne," he said kindly. "Suppose I take you home? Shall I?"

"I wish you would, David," answered the girl. "I'm just about ready to drop, I'm so tired."

Taking her arm, he helped her over the ruts and rough places, until they finally emerged from the wood and started on the road to town.

There were many other Hallowe'en parties out that night; singing and laughing was heard in every direction.

"It's like a play," said Anne, "only everything is behind the scenes. Don't think I haven't enjoyed it, David, just because I got tired. I never played with boys and girls of my own age before. What fun it is!"

"Isn't it?" replied the young man. "I love to get out, once in a while, and have a good time like this. I find I can work all the better after it's over."

Presently the others caught up with them, breathless and laughing.

"Miss Leece is stolen," cried Grace, "before ever she was hanged or burned. I do wonder what they'll do with her."

"Oh, leave her in the woods," responded Reddy, "to scare the birds away."

"Good night, Anne," continued Grace. "David will take you home. We go this way. Don't be frightened about to-morrow. I doubt if she says anything; and if she does, we are all implicated."

The young people separated, still singing and laughing; never dreaming of the storm brewing from their evening's prank.

"Anne," pursued David, as they strolled down River Street together, "when I make my flying machine will you be afraid to take a sail with me?"

"Never," replied Anne, "but I wish it had been made in time to carry me away from Miss Leece to-morrow morning."

And Anne's words had more meaning than either of them realized at the time.

Imagine the surprise and horror of the Hallowe'en party when, next morning, they discovered the effigy of Miss Leece planted right in front of the Girls' High School!

And the teacher herself was the first to see the impious outrage.

CHAPTER VIII

MISS LEECE

YES, there stood the hideous, grotesque effigy just where her abductors had left her the night before, her green veil floating in the breezes. As a figure of fun and an object of ridicule, she might not have created more than a ripple with the faculty. But it was evident that Miss Leece's function, even in effigy, was to make trouble.

And trouble was certainly brewing that memorable morning. The figure itself might never have been recognized, but a placard which had been pinned on the front of the old ulster left no room for doubt. Across it had been inscribed in large printed letters:

"THE MOST UNPOPULAR TEACHER IN SCHOOL."

No one dared take the effigy away for fear of being implicated. Everybody had seen it, both men and women professors and the boys and girls of the two schools. But it was not until Miss Thompson, the principal of the Girls' High School, had arrived that the figure was removed.

"How could those boys have been so mean!" exclaimed Grace to her three friends just before

the gong sounded. "They might have known what would happen."

There was an ominous quiet in the various class rooms all morning; but nothing was said or done to indicate just when the storm would burst. When the first class in algebra met, Anne trembled with fear, but Miss Leece, in a robin's egg-blue dress, which offset the angry hue of her complexion, was apparently too angry to trust herself to look in the direction of the young girl and the lesson progressed without incident.

However, she was only biding her time.

"Miss Pierson," she said, toward the end of the lesson, in a voice so rasping as to make the girls fairly shiver, "go to the blackboard and demonstrate this problem."

Then she read aloud in the same disagreeable voice, the following difficult problem:

" 'Train A starts from Chicago going thirty miles an hour. An hour later Train B starts from Chicago going thirty-five miles an hour. How far from Chicago will they be when Train B passes Train A?' "

The girls looked up surprised. The problem was well in advance of what they had been studying and Miss Leece was really asking Anne to recite something she had not yet learned.

Anne hardly knew how to reply to the terrible woman who stood glowering at her as if she would like to crush her to bits.

"I'm sorry," said the girl. "I cannot."

"Miss Nesbit," said the teacher, "will you demonstrate this problem?"

Miriam rose with a little smile of triumph on her face and went to the blackboard, where she worked out the problem.

"Why, what on earth does the woman mean?" whispered Grace. "Are we expected to learn lessons we have never been taught and has that horrid Miriam been studying ahead?"

"I think I must be dreaming," replied Anne, looking sorrowfully at Miss Leece.

"Miss Pierson," thundered the teacher, "you are aware, I believe, that I permit no conversation in this class. Stupidity and inattention are not to be supported in any student, and I must ask you to leave the room."

Anne rose in a dazed sort of way, looking very small and shabby as she left the room.

But Miss Leece was not to come off so easily in the fight, and Anne had a splendid champion in Grace Harlowe, who could not endure injustice and was fearless where her rights or her friends' rights were concerned.

She rose quietly and faced the angry teacher, who already regretted having gone so far.

"If Miss Pierson is to be ordered from the room, Miss Leece, I shall follow her. I spoke to her first. I was naturally surprised that you gave out a problem so far in advance of our regular work. It is doubtful if any girl in the class could do it except Miriam, and she must have been prepared."

"Miss Harlowe," said Miss Leece, stamping her foot, and again giving way to rage, "I must ask you to take your seat at once and never interfere again with the way I conduct this class."

"You conduct this class with injustice and violence, Miss Leece," said Grace, turning very white, but holding herself in admirable control considering the conduct of the older woman.

"I am in no humor to be answered back this morning, Miss Harlowe, and I would advise you to be careful," continued the enraged woman. "I have had enough to try me since last night and this morning. Miss Pierson must answer to the principal for those insults, and her insubordination just now has only made matters worse."

"Miss Pierson has nothing to answer for which I have not, and I shall join her," replied Grace, and she left the room.

Miss Leece was about to continue the lesson when Jessica, pale and trembling, rose and fol-

lowed her friend. Nora was next to go and in another moment there was not a girl left in the algebra class except Miriam and her four particular friends. The gong sounded as the last pupil closed the door behind her, but there was little doubt that the first class in algebra had gone on a strike.

The noon recess gong had sounded before the girls were able to meet and talk about the incident, and, during the time that intervened, Anne had received a summons in the form of a small note to meet the principal in her office at three that afternoon. She said nothing to her friends, however, and hid the envelope in her pocket.

The girls in IV. algebra gathered around their friends to hear the story. They were indignant and expressed their readiness to join the strike out of sympathy in case there was any more trouble.

"They have no right to put such a violent woman over us," said Grace, as she nibbled at a pickle and a cracker in the locker room. "I wish they would give me the opportunity. I should be more than willing to testify to her behavior before the entire faculty and the school board combined."

Anne, herself, the center of the whole affair was very quiet. This remarkable young girl

seemed to possess some secret force that she was able to draw upon when she most needed it.

"Anne, you precious child," exclaimed the impetuous Nora, "you must not get scared. Whatever happens, the whole class means to stand by you. Don't we, girls?"

"Yes," came from all sides.

"I don't think anything in particular will happen," replied Anne. "I believe Miss Leece really wants to prevent my winning the prize. That's all."

"She has certainly adopted a pet," cried Marian Barber.

"What did Miriam Nesbit mean by studying ahead like that?" exclaimed another. "It was disloyal to the whole class."

"It looks very much as if they had fixed it up between them," continued Grace. "I'm sorry about the effigy, but I won't stand that kind of favoritism. It's mean and underhanded."

After school Anne lingered in the corridor until the other girls had gone. Then she made her way slowly to the office of the principal. "Come in," came the answer to her timid knock.

Miss Thompson, the principal, was a fine woman, much beloved by the people of Oakdale where she had served as principal of the Girls' High School for many years. She had adjusted

"Miss Pierson, Do You Recognize This Figure?"

numerous difficulties in her time, but never such a knotty problem as the present one. It was incredible that Anne Pierson, who stood so well in her classes that she had already been mentioned by the faculty, should have engaged in such an escapade as Miss Leece had accused her of.

"Sit down," she said kindly to the young girl, whose small, tired face appealed to her sympathies. "What is this trouble between you and Miss Leece, Miss Pierson?" she continued, plunging into the subject.

"I do not know myself, Miss Thompson," answered Anne quietly.

"But she accuses you of rather terrible things, Miss Pierson," went on the principal, picking up a slip of paper and reading aloud, " 'inattention, insubordination, impertinence and a tendency to make trouble.' Have you any answer to make to these charges?"

"No," replied Anne.

"Have you nothing to say?"

"Only that they are untrue."

"Miss Pierson," continued the principal, opening a closet door, "do you recognize this figure."

There, hanging by its neck on a coat hook and still wearing its fantastic bonnet and green veil, was the famous effigy.

Anne looked at the absurd thing for a moment in silence. Then her eyes met Miss Thompson's, and both teacher and pupil burst out laughing.

The young girl never knew how far that laugh went to soften her present predicament. As a matter of fact, Miss Thompson had never liked the teacher in mathematics, while the small, shabby pupil appealed strongly to her sympathy.

"Were you not the originator of this outrageous plot, Miss Pierson?"

Anne was silent. She could hardly say she was the originator and still she had participated.

"I will put the question in another form," said the principal. "If you were not the originator, who was?"

Still Anne made no reply.

"Miss Leece," continued the principal, "alleges that she distinctly saw you standing by the figure. She did not recognize the other faces. Do you think, Miss Pierson, that such an escapade as you engaged in last night was entirely respectful or worthy of a pupil of Oakdale High School?"

"No," replied Anne at last.

"Do you know that suspension or expulsion are the punishments for such behavior?"

Anne clasped her hands nervously. She saw

the freshman prize floating away, and her eyes filled with tears, but she said nothing.

Instead of being angry, however, Miss Thompson was pleased with the girl's pluck and loyalty. But she was puzzled to know how to proceed. Her judgment and her sympathies revolted against punishing this prize pupil, and still it looked as if Miss Leece had everything on her side. A tap at the door interrupted her reflections, and Anne opened it, admitting Mrs. Gray escorted by David and Grace.

"My dear Miss Thompson," said the old lady, "I know you will consider me an interfering old woman, but when I heard that my particular child, Anne Pierson, was in trouble, I came straight to you. I want to talk the whole matter over comfortably; since it's my own freshman class that's on the rampage, I feel as if I had a right to put in a word."

"You are most welcome, Mrs. Gray," replied Miss Thompson, cordially.

She was exceedingly fond of the lonely old lady who had been a benefactor to the school in so many ways. "But what's this you say about the freshman class? I have heard nothing about it."

"Grace," said Mrs. Gray, "suppose you tell Miss Thompson what you have just finished telling me."

Then Grace related the incident in the algebra class and the long succession of insults Anne had endured from the terrible Miss Leece.

"Dear, dear," murmured Miss Thompson, "this looks like persecution and very strong favoritism on the part of Miss Leece. A thing we wish to keep out of the school as much as possible. But what about this?" and she opened the door of the closet where the pumpkin face of the effigy grinned at them grotesquely from the shadows.

"I have something to say about that, Miss Thompson," declared David. "I am the author of this 'crime' and I intend to take the blame for it. Miss Pierson had so little to do with it that we had fairly to drag her out of her own house to make her join the crowd."

"I think, Miss Thompson," put in Mrs. Gray, "that a teacher must have been exceedingly sharp and disagreeable to have inspired such nice children to this," and she pointed to the figure.

"I believe you are right," admitted the principal after a moment's thought, "and I trust, under the circumstances, that the whole affair can be settled without the interference of the School Board. Suppose you leave Miss Leece to me. And young people," she added, "if you will promise to say nothing more about the sub-

ject, I think Miss Leece may be persuaded to let the matter drop."

And so ended the Hallowen'en escapade. Miss Thompson paid a visit to Miss Leece that evening, at the teacher's rooms in Oakdale, and was closeted with her for more than an hour. No one ever knew what happened. Miss Thompson was a woman to keep her own counsel; but the affair never came up before the School Board and Miss Leece, after that, though somewhat stiff in her manner, had no more outbursts of rage for some time. Undoubtedly her display of favoritism in the algebra class had lost her the day.

Miss Thompson was a woman of fine judgment and broad and just views. She was proud of the Oakdale High Schools and the splendid classes they turned out year after year. She realized perfectly what a disturbance a woman like Miss Leece could cause and she determined to check her at every point, especially when the most prominent and finest pupils of the two schools were implicated.

Therefore the offenders went scot-free and Anne was once more safe to pursue the freshman prize.

Miss Leece, however, was only biding her time. While Anne had won this battle she might lose the next.

CHAPTER IX

THANKSGIVING DAY

"OH, how I love Thanksgiving!" cried Grace.

"Oh, how you love turkey, you mean," exclaimed her bosom friend, Nora O'Malley.

"Yes," admitted Grace, "the turkey is a grand old bird, bless him, but football is what I really love, delightful, thrilling football. I wish I could play center on the home team. I know I could make a touchdown as well as the best of them."

The crowd of young people were seated on straw in the bottom of a large road wagon that was slowly making its way from Grace's house out to the football grounds. It was decorated with the colors of the Oakdale High School, sea-blue and white, and the girls wore blue and white rosettes and carried long horns from which dangled ribbon streamers. Numbers of Oakdale people were hurrying down the road toward the field, and the crisp autumn air vibrated with the sounds of talk and laughter. In the distance could be heard the music of the town band, which always gave a concert before the Thanksgiving game.

"And to think that little Anne has never in her life seen a football game!" exclaimed Jessica.

Anne blushed.

"Yes," she replied reluctantly, "I'll have to admit this is my very first game, but I understand the rules. Grace has explained them to me. I hope our boys will win."

"If the Dunsmore boys are in good trim, I'm afraid they'll give us a stiff pull," observed David, "but the stiffer the pull the more interesting it is to watch, so long as they don't lick us."

Just then the wagon drew up at the grounds and the boys and girls jumped out and made their way through the crowd to their seats.

Everybody in Oakdale turned out for the annual Thanksgiving football game. The professors and their wives, the teachers from the Girls' High School and all the pupils were there in full force, besides the citizens of Oakdale and their families. There was really a very large assemblage in the semicircular ampitheater which was hung with bunting and flags in honor of the great occasion, and probably not one in the whole cheerful company but had enjoyed a good Thanksgiving dinner that afternoon, so good humor beamed from every face.

"Don't you think this is a thrilling sight,

Anne?" demanded Grace, for there was not a soul in Oakdale who was not vain of the High School football team, which had won for itself honors all over the state.

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Anne, clasping her hands and waiting impatiently for the performance to commence.

Just then the band struck up again, and under cover of the music David whispered to Jessica:

"Do you see that man over there to the right on the back seat, with long, dark hair and a slouch hat?"

Jessica found the individual presently, starting slightly when she saw his face.

"I do believe it's Anne's father," she whispered.

"It just is," said David, "and he's looking hard at Anne, too. I wonder if he means to make another scene."

"Poor Anne!" sighed Jessica. "She seems to have more than her fair share of troubles."

The two teams then filed out for warming-up practice; the excitement of the ensuing game drove all thought of the sinister looking Mr. Pierson out of their heads, for the time being. The first half ended in a brilliant touchdown for the High School boys, though the kick for goal failed. Immediately the place rang with the cheers of the spectators. Crowds of boys

rushed up and down giving the High School yell and when the noise died down somewhat the girls started the High School song:

"Here's three cheers for dear old Oakdale,
God bless her, everyone!"

Anne was thrilled. Never had she enjoyed herself so much. She stood upon the seat beside Grace and waved a blue and white banner as frantically as anybody else.

"I don't think I quite understand what it's all about," she confided to David, who sat next to her, "but I am very happy all the same."

David smiled down into the radiant face. What a new dress and hat can do for one small, insignificant little person is quite wonderful sometimes. And Anne, with the money she had earned from Mrs. Gray, had replenished her wardrobe. In her neat brown suit and broad-brimmed hat she was really pretty, in a queer, quiet sort of way, David thought. He wondered if the father, hidden by rows of people, in the back, would be able to see how prosperous and well his daughter was looking. But his attention was recalled to the football field, for the next half was going against the High School, and there was apprehension among the sons and daughters of Oakdale.

"Dunsmore! Dunsmore!" cried a delegation from Dunsmore College.

But Dunsmore was not to be the victor that Thanksgiving Day. It was ordained that, just as hope had almost expired, a slender, fleet-footed young junior of the High School team should seize the ball and fly like the wind across the line. Score 10 to 1—Oakdale's score!

Immediately a terrific hubbub began. Surely the place had gone mad, Anne thought. The hundreds of spectators, including Grace and her party, had rushed from the ampitheater, clambered over the railing and dashed into the field of glory. Such yelling and roaring, such blowing of horns while the hero of the afternoon was carried about on the shoulders of his fellows, made her heart palpitate wildly. Her friends had forgotten all about her, evidently, or perhaps they thought she had followed.

"Anne," said a voice in her ear, "don't make any disturbance. I want you to come with me."

Anne turned around quickly and faced her father.

"Come at once!" he said. "I want to get out of this howling mob as soon as possible. We can talk later."

He took her hand, not ungently, and presently they found themselves on the other side of the fence surrounding the field. Anne had not meant to go, but she knew her father was quite capable of making a scene and she felt she

couldn't endure it just then. Once outside, she thought she might escape. Never once, however, did he release her hand until he had her safe in one of the town hacks and they had started down the road.

When Grace and her friends finally recovered from their wild joy and excitement there was no Anne to be found.

"Perhaps she stayed in her seat," exclaimed Grace, but the place was quite empty.

David and Jessica looked about them uneasily.

"What chumps we were!" said the young man presently. "We never bothered to look after her, and now probably that old parent of hers has actually gone and kidnapped the poor child."

They searched through the crowds everywhere, but Anne was nowhere about.

At last David and Jessica confessed their suspicions to Grace.

"Oh, oh!" cried Grace, "I feel as if we were personally responsible for her! What shall we do?"

David thought a minute.

"Is there a play at the Opera House tonight?" he asked presently.

"I believe there is," replied Grace. "Why?"

"Ten to one Anne's father is acting in it,"

said David, "and that is the reason he happens to be in Oakdale to-day."

"That's a very brilliant idea if it happens to be true," said Jessica. "But don't you think we had better see Miss Mary Pierson before we do anything?"

"No," exclaimed Grace decisively. She was in the habit of thinking quickly and her friends usually let her have her way; but it was generally the best way. "It would be a pity to alarm her unnecessarily if we can avoid it. Anne isn't expected home until late, anyway. She is invited as are all of you to eat supper at my house. Suppose we go right to town, while David makes some inquiries at the Opera House. Then, if Anne's father is really acting in town to-night, we shall know what to do."

Accordingly, they tumbled into the road wagon, whipped up the horse and drove back to Oakdale as fast as they could go. On the way in, they saw a new bill posted on a wall, advertising a play entitled "Forsaken." It showed, in vivid colors, a young girl very ragged and tired looking, asleep on the steps of a large church.

"Let's go to the show," cried Nora, who always managed to combine amusement with duty; "that is," she added, "if Anne's father is in it. Of course, Anne will probably be somewhere

about, in that case, and we could spirit her away while he is acting."

"That isn't a bad idea," answered David. "But I'd better find out a few things first. I'll come over to your house, Grace, and report," he called as he jumped out of the back of the cart.

The girls waited impatiently for his return, feeling that every moment Anne might be speeding away in some outgoing train, and they were losing valuable time. Grace had thought of consulting her mother, her best and wisest counsellor at all times, but Mr. and Mrs. Harlowe had gone on a long drive to the home of Mrs. Harlowe's mother and would not return until late that night. In half an hour their patience was rewarded; the gate clicked and David ran breathlessly up the walk, joining them presently in the parlor.

"It's true," he cried excitedly. "Anne is at the Spencer Arms, probably locked up in a room. Her father is acting to-night in 'Forsaken,' and the whole company leaves town on the 11.30 train. I suppose Anne must go to the theater, for there will be no time to go back to the hotel after the play. I got the whole thing out of the clerk."

"Then we can all go to the theater," cried Nora triumphantly.

"What good will that do Anne?" demanded practical Grace.

"It may do her no good whatever," said David, "but it would be well not to lose sight of the father, even, if we must follow him to the train. And if Anne knows we are near, she will be able to get back her nerve."

"Children," cried Grace suddenly, "I have a scheme. I won't put it into action unless it's absolutely necessary, but it's bound to work."

"What is it?" demanded the others.

"I won't tell," replied Grace mysteriously, "because I may not have to use it, and I'll warn you that it's rather dangerous. But it will save Anne, and we just mustn't get caught."

CHAPTER X

GRACE KEEPS HER SECRET

THE "best" Oakdale people did not often see the melodramas that appeared from time to time at the small opera house. Occasionally, if something really good came along, Oakdale society turned out in force and filled the boxes and the orchestra seats; but, generally speaking, the little theater was only half filled.

And such was the case on this Thanksgiving

night. Most of the audience was made up of farmers out holiday-making with their families, factory girls from the silk mills and a few storekeepers and clerks.

"I am glad there are so few people here," observed Grace, looking around the scanty audience; "because, if we have to resort to my scheme, it will make it much easier and less dangerous."

"What in the world is it?" pleaded Jessica.

"Never mind," answered her friend. "I'm afraid you'll object, so I won't tell until the last minute."

Just then a wheezy orchestra struck up a march and the High School party settled down in their seats, each with a secret feeling that it was rather good fun, in spite of the peculiar reason that had taken them there.

"Here he is," said Nora, pointing to the name on the programme. "He takes the part of Amos Lord, owner of the woolen mills."

At that moment the lights went down and the music stopped short. The curtain rolled up slowly disclosing the front of a church. It was night and lights gleamed through the stained glass windows. Snow was falling and from the church came the sound of organ music playing the wedding march. The picture was really very impressive, although the music was some-

what throaty and the flakes of snow were larger than life-size.

But who was it half lying, half sitting on the church steps, shivering with cold?

The girls had not been so often to the theater that they could afford to be disdainful over almost any passable play, and from the very moment the curtain went up their interest was aroused. Certainly, there was something extremely romantic and interesting about the lonely little figure on the church steps.

"That's the heroine," whispered Jessica. "Her name is Evelyn Chase."

Then people began to go into the church. It was a wedding evidently, although the groom was a tall, lean, middle-aged individual with gray hair.

"It's Mr. Pierson himself," exclaimed Nora in a loud whisper.

The bride-to-be was young and quite pretty. She was not dressed in white, but it was plain she was the bride because she carried a bouquet and hung on the arm of Anne's incorrigible parent. As they started up the steps, what should they stumble over but the half-frozen form of the young girl!

Then, there was a great deal of acting, not badly done at all, thought David, who had had more experience in these matters than his

friends. The bride refused to go on with the ceremony until the poor little thing was taken care of. The groom would brook no delay, for, oh, perfidy, he had recognized in the still figure his own child by a former wife deserted years before.

Slowly the forsaken girl regained consciousness, lifted her head from the steps, threw back her shawl, and——

"Heavens and earth, it's Anne herself!" exclaimed Grace.

It was Anne. They were so startled and amazed they nearly tumbled off their seats.

"As I live, it is Anne, and acting beautifully!" whispered David.

"Where did she learn how?" demanded Jessica. "Strange she never told it."

But they were too interested to reply, for the action of the play was excellent and the interest held until the curtain rang down on the first act.

"No wonder he wants to keep her with him," ejaculated David when the lights went up. "She is the star performer in the show."

"She is wonderful," declared Grace. "To think that little, brown, quiet thing could be so talented! I always imagined acting was the hardest thing in the world to do, but it seems as though she had always been on the stage."

"Are we still going to try to save her?" asked Nora.

"Of course," replied David. "She doesn't want to act. Didn't you hear her say so that night? She wants to go to school."

"But it seems a pity, somehow, when she is so talented."

"She's just as talented in her studies," said Grace, "and I've often heard that stage life is very hard. No, no! I intend to do my best to get Anne away this very night, if it upsets the entire town of Oakdale."

When the second act was over, and Anne had actually so moved her audience that one old farmer was audibly sobbing into a red cotton handkerchief, and the girls themselves were secretly wiping their eyes, Grace whispered to David:

"I'm going to write a note, if you'll lend me a pencil and a slip of paper, and wrap it around the stem of this chrysanthemum. When Anne appears in the next act, you go up in the box, and if she's alone an instant pitch it to her. Then she will know what she's to do."

"But what is she to do?" demanded the others.

"I won't tell," persisted Grace. "You'll object, if I do."

"All right," said David. "I'll obey you

Mistress Grace, although I wish you would confide in me."

But Grace was obdurate. She would tell no one.

The last act disclosed an attic at the top of an old tenement, with dormer windows looking out on a wintry scene. Anne appeared, more ragged than ever, carrying a little basket of matches. It was evident that she was a match girl by trade, and that this was her wretched domicile. As she crept down the center of the stage, ill and wretched, for she was supposed to be about to die—David saw his opportunity. From behind the curtain of the box he tossed the chrysanthemum, which fell right at her feet.

"If she only sees it," he thought.

But apparently she didn't. Going wearily to an old cupboard, she took out a crust of bread. Then she drew the ragged curtains at the windows and lit a candle. Simultaneously the entire attic was illuminated, for stage candles have remarkable powers of diffusing light.

"Why doesn't she pick up the flower?" exclaimed Grace. "If she doesn't the scheme won't work at all."

"I believe she's going to die," whispered Nora in a broken voice.

Just then the Irish comedian appeared, puffing and blowing from the long climb he had had

to the top of the house. He had come to bring help to the dying girl, but he was funny in spite of the dreary tragedy, and Nora changed her tears to laughter and began to giggle violently, burying her face in her handkerchief in her effort to control her mirth. Her laughter was always contagious, and presently her two friends were giggling in chorus.

"Do hush, Nora O'Malley!" whispered Jessica nervously. "You know that if you once get us started we'll never stop."

A countryman, sitting back of Nora, touched her on the shoulder.

"Be you laughing or crying, miss?" he asked. "It ain't a time for laughing nor yet for crying, since the young lady ain't dead yet and I don't believe she's goin' to die, either."

"She just is," exclaimed Nora, wiping the tears from her eyes. "She'll die before she gets off that bed to-night, I'll wager anything."

All this while, the chrysanthemum with the note twisted and pinned to its stem lay in the middle of the stage. In the meantime, Anne had fallen into a stupor from cold and hunger. The kind little comedian rushed about the stage, making a fire, putting on the tea kettle and stumbling over his own feet in an effort to be useful.

"Now, all the others will enter in a minute,"

whispered Grace disgustedly, "and she'll never get it at all."

Just then Anne turned on her pillow and opened her eyes. They looked straight at David, who was sitting in the front of the box. He pointed deliberately at the chrysanthemum.

"She sees it," said Jessica, for Anne's eyes were now fixed on the flower.

When the kind Irishman departed to spend his last cent on medicine and food for the dying girl, she rose, staggered across the stage, seized the chrysanthemum and rushed back again, just in time to be lying prone when her father entered, now a repentant and sorrowful sinner.

"It's all right," whispered Grace in a relieved tone. "I feel sure that the plan will work to perfection."

Anne *did* die a stage death, and there was not a dry eye in the house when she forgave her father, bade farewell to the entire company, who had now gathered in the attic, and her soul passed out to soft music while the lights were turned very low.

"Fire! Fire!" rang out a voice from the darkened house.

Where did the voice come from? Nora and Jessica were so startled they could only clutch each other and wonder, while Grace whispered:

"Don't move from your seats."

"Grace, was that your voice?" whispered David, who had joined the girls during the death-bed scene.

But Grace made no reply. She only put her finger to her lips as she held his arm with a detaining hand.

There was a panic in the house. The audience rushed for the doors while the actors leaped over the footlights in their mad scramble to escape. Several women's voices took up the cry of fire and the place was in wild confusion. Evidently the man who managed the lights had been too frightened to turn them on again, for the theater still remained in semi-darkness.

The four young people did not move while the audience was crowding out of the aisles.

"We might as well be suffocated as crushed," observed David. "It's a much more comfortable death, and besides I can't smell any smoke."

Grace smiled but was silent.

"I'm here at last," announced Anne's well-known voice behind them.

And there she was, still in her ragged stage dress, carrying her hat and coat on her arm.

"Why, Anne Pierson!" cried Nora, "I thought you were dead and gone."

Anne laughed.

"Not dead," she said. "But I would certainly have been gone in another half hour. We

needn't hurry," she continued. "I don't believe he would ever think of looking for me inside the theater, and, for the time being, this is the safest place."

"Anne, why did you never tell us you were an actress?" demanded David.

"I was afraid to," faltered the girl. "I was afraid you would all hate me if you knew the truth. Besides, I never acted but six months in all my life. We toured in this play a year ago, and I knew the part perfectly. It would have been cruel of me not to have played to-night. The girl who usually does it was sick and there was no one to take her part. When father told me that, I knew I should have to do it this once, but if the fire panic hadn't started I couldn't have gotten away from him very easily. He would have made a terrible scene. And even then, it might have been difficult. No stranger would have helped me run away from my own father, who is determined that I shall go on the stage. He thinks I have the making of an actress. But I don't like the stage life. It is hard and ugly. I want to study, and be with girls like you." A charming smile radiated her small, intelligent face.

"Where do I come in?" asked David, looking at her.

"I think you are the best friend I have in the

world, David," declared Anne. "I can never forget your kindness."

"And now, Mademoiselle Annette Piersonelli," asked David, secretly much pleased at the girl's earnestness, "can't you divest yourself of your ragged dress before we go?"

"Yes, indeed," she replied. "I am fully clothed underneath." She slipped off the stage dress and put on her hat and coat.

Meanwhile, not a soul was left in the theater except two of the ushers, who were sniffing around trying to find out where the fire scare had originated.

"There comes father," whispered Anne. "Can't we hide behind the seats?"

"Quick," cautioned David. "He's coming down the center aisle.

The five young people crouched low while the actor stalked down the aisle. But it was plain he was not looking for his daughter in the theater, for he called out to one of the ushers moving about at a distance:

"Have you seen anything of the young girl who was with the company? I lost her during the panic and I haven't been able to locate her since. I must be leaving town in a few minutes," he added, consulting his watch. "It's almost time for the train now."

"The company all left with the audience,"

said the usher. "I guess she went along with 'em."

"Now is our time," said Anne, when the actor had disappeared. "Suppose we go out the stage entrance and down that side street?"

Whereupon she led the way back of the boxes and into the wings, followed by her friends, who looked curiously about them at the unusual sight.

"What a queer place," said Grace, "and how smudgy the scenery looks! Are these little places dressing rooms, Anne?"

"Yes," answered Anne. "You see, it's all horrid when you are close. And the life is worse—riding almost every day on smoky trains and spending each night in a different place. The people are so different, too. I would rather go to Oakdale High School," she exclaimed, "than be the greatest actress in the world."

They were standing in one of the larger dressing rooms while Anne endeavored to wipe the powder and rouge from her face with a pocket handkerchief.

A tall figure darkened the doorway, and in the glass Anne saw the reflection of her father's face. Without a word, she ran to the open window and jumped out on the fire escape. The others followed nimbly after her. Mr. Pierson turned and rushed down the passage to the side entrance.

"Hurry, Anne!" called David. "He will meet you at the bottom if you don't."

They climbed quickly down the ladder, almost treading on each other's fingers in their haste, and in another moment they were running down an alleyway.

"Another narrow escape," cried Anne, when they were out of danger. "How shall I ever thank you, dear friends?"

"You have already discharged the debt, Anne, by letting us see you act," answered Grace.

"By the way, Grace," commanded David, "own up now. It was you, wasn't it, who started the fire panic?"

"I told you I wouldn't tell," answered Grace, "and I never shall."

"Anne, did she say anything about it in her note?" asked Nora.

"No," said Anne mysteriously, "she never mentioned the word 'fire' at all."

"I feel certain it was you who called 'fire,' Grace," said Jessica.

"I'll never, never tell," cried Grace teasingly; "so you'll never, never know."

She turned in at her own gate and to this day the mystery is still unsolved.

CHAPTER XI

MRS. GRAY'S ADOPTED DAUGHTERS

AFTER Mrs. Gray's luncheon party in honor of Grace and her three friends a tiny little idea had implanted itself in her mind. As the weeks rolled on, and Christmas holidays approached, it grew and spread into a real plan which occupied her thoughts a considerable part of every day.

As a secretary Anne had turned out admirably. The only drawback was that Mrs. Gray could not see enough of her. The lonesome old lady almost lived on Anne's semi-weekly visits, but the girl was too busy to give any more of her time to reading aloud or driving with her benefactor.

Finally Mrs. Gray took a bold step. She invited the four girls to meet at another Sunday luncheon, and announced her intentions from the head of the table.

"My dear children," she said, "you are aware that I am a very old woman."

"We are not aware of anything of the sort, Mrs. Gray," interrupted Grace.

"Nevertheless I am," pursued Mrs. Gray. "A very old, lonesome person with few pleas-

ures. I have decided, therefore, to do an exceedingly selfish thing, and give myself a real treat."

"You deserve it if anyone in the world does, Mrs. Gray," put in Jessica. "You who are always giving other people treats."

"Wait until you hear the plan, child, before you pass judgment," answered Mrs. Gray. "It's been too many years to count since I have had a really, jolly Christmas," she continued. "I have just sat here in this quiet old house, and let the holidays roll over me without even noticing them."

"Now, Mrs. Gray," exclaimed Grace, "the poor people in Oakdale would not agree with you on that point. Only last Christmas I saw your carriage stopping in front of the Flower Mission, and it was simply bursting with presents."

"Yes, yes, my dear. It is the easiest thing in the world to give presents and not so much pleasure after all. What I want is some actual fun, good Christmas cheer and plenty of young people. But I shall have to be selfish if I'm to get it all, because it will mean that I'm to rob mothers and fathers for a whole week of their children. Mr. and Mrs. Harlowe will have to learn to do without you, Grace, for seven days and nights. Your father, Jessica, must

keep his own house. Nora, your brothers and sister must not expect to see you at all while you belong to me. As for my precious Anne, here, I should just like to steal her away altogether from her mother. In fact, my dears, I am going to adopt you for a whole week during the holidays and then—such larks!"

And the charming old lady looked so gay and pretty that the girls all laughed joyously.

"Do you mean that you really want us to make you a visit, Mrs. Gray?"

"I do indeed. That is the exceedingly selfish wish I have been entertaining for the last six weeks. I not only want it, but I have arranged for it already. I have made secret calls, my dears, and mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters are all most agreeable. You are to come to me a week before Christmas and must settle yourselves exactly as if you were my own children. I mean to punish any homesick girl severely by giving her an overdose of chocolate drops. Families may be visited once a day, if necessary, though I shall frown down upon too frequent absences. But, young ladies, before we get any further, tell me what you think of the plan?"

The girls were almost speechless with amazement and pleasure. To visit Mrs. Gray's beautiful home and live in a whirl of parties and

funmaking such as would be sure to follow was more than any of them had ever dreamed of.

"It's prefectly delightful, Mrs. Gray!" they cried almost in one breath.

"And we shall give the Christmas party together, my four daughters and I, and we'll do exactly as we choose and invite whom we please."

"Oh, oh!" exclaimed the four young girls. "Won't it be fun?"

"It will for me," said the little old lady. "And I need to have a good time. I am getting old before my time for lack of amusement. And now, my lady-birds, who else shall we invite to the house party?"

"Who else?" said Grace, somewhat crestfallen; for four intimate girl chums are invariably jealous of admitting other girls to the charmed circle.

"Do you mean what other girls, Mrs. Gray?" asked Jessica.

"No, no, child; I mean what other boys, of course. Do you think I want any more than my four nice freshmen to amuse me? But I don't think this party would be complete without four fine fellows to look after us. Who are the four nicest boys you know?"

"David," exclaimed all four voices in unison.

Mrs. Gray laughed.

"There seems to be no difference of opinion on that score," she replied; "but is David the only boy in Oakdale?"

"He's the nicest one," said Anne, who could never forget how kind David had been to her when his sister was her bitter enemy.

"Reddy Brooks is nice, too," said Nora. "He threw apples at some tramps once, and saved us from being robbed."

"Very good," said Mrs. Gray. "Reddy Brooks shall certainly be invited to the house party. I admire courage above all things."

"Then there's 'Hippopotamus' Wingate," said Jessica.

"Who?" demanded Mrs. Gray.

"His name is really 'Theophilus', but the boys have always called him "Hippopotamus,' and now the name sticks to him and everybody forgets he has any other."

"Are you agreed on Hippopotamus, my adopted daughters?" demanded Mrs. Gray.

It was voted by acclamation, that Hippopotamus was agreeable to the company.

"And now, I have a fourth to propose," announced Mrs. Gray. "I think I should like to import my great-nephew, Tom Gray, from New York. He is a little older than these boys, perhaps. Nineteen is his age, I think, and I haven't seen him since he was a child; but he's

obliged to be nice because he bears the name of one beloved by all who knew him."

"Whose name, Mrs. Gray?" asked Nora.

"That of my husband," said the old lady, softly. "The nicest Tom Gray this world has ever known." And she looked at a portrait over the sideboard of a very handsome young man dressed in the uniform of an Army officer.

"He loved his country, my dears, and fought for it nobly. He was a soldier and a gentleman," went on the old lady proudly, "and I am sorry he left no son to follow in his footsteps. He was a great hunter and traveler, too. I used to tell him if he had not loved his family so dearly, he would certainly have been a gypsy. He liked camping and tramping, and used to wander off in Upton Woods for hours at a time. He knew the names of all the trees and birds and animals that exist, I believe. But he loved his home, too, and no woods had the power to draw him away from it for long. I used to tell him he had brought a piece of the forest and put it in our front yard, for he planted all those beautiful trees you now see growing on my lawn, which my old gardener, who has been with me since I was first married, cherishes as he would his own children."

"And is young Tom Gray like him, Mrs. Gray?" interposed Grace.

"I hope so, my dear," sighed the old lady. "If he has inherited the beautiful traits of his uncle, his wholesome tastes for the outdoors and nature, he can't help being a fine fellow. But I have not seen my nephew since he was a child. He has been living here and there all these years, sometimes in America and sometimes in England. His mother and father are both dead, and he has been brought up by his mother's unmarried sisters, who are half English themselves. But he must be a nice boy, even if he has only one drop of his uncle's blood in his veins."

The girls sighed and said nothing. It was touching and beautiful to see the old lady's loyalty and devotion after all these years of loneliness; for her husband had been dead since she was a young woman. Still Mrs. Gray never brooded. She was always cheerful and happy in doing kindnesses for other people.

"If ever I marry," sentimental Jessica was thinking, "I hope it will be somebody like Mrs. Gray's husband."

"I should like to have a brother like Tom Gray," observed Grace aloud.

"Well," said Mrs Gray, "we shall have to wait and see what the new Tom Gray is like. He may be utterly unlike *my* Tom Gray."

And the old lady sighed.

"We shall all have to get new party dresses," exclaimed Nora to change the subject. "I have been wanting one for an age and now I have a good excuse."

"Oh, yes," cried Grace enthusiastically. "Now, at last, I shall be able to get the blue silk mother promised I could have if at any time there was an occasion worthy of it."

"I'm going to ask papa to give me a lavender crepe for a Christmas present," said Jessica.

"O Mrs. Gray," continued Nora, "we are going to have such fun Oakdale can't hold us."

"I think we should have a surprise for Mrs. Gray," announced Grace. "She is doing so much for us. O girls! I have an idea."

"What?" demanded the others breathlessly, including Mrs. Gray herself, who was as full of curiosity as a young girl.

"No, no," cried Grace, "it wouldn't be a surprise if I gave it away. But it's going to require a lot of work and planning to carry it out."

"Is it big or little?" asked the dainty old lady as eager as a child to find out the secret.

"It's rather small," answered Grace.

"Fine or superfine?"

"Both," laughed Grace. "But you'll not know till Christmas night; so stifle your curiosity."

"I suppose I must wait, but it's going to be very hard," replied Mrs. Gray plaintively.

And so the party was arranged. Notes, written by Anne, were dispatched to the four boys; plans were discussed for the week's amusements, and the four girls finally started home in a state of great excitement to look over their wardrobes and furbish up their party dresses.

Only Anne had looked somewhat dubious during the conversation. How could she spend a week in a beautiful house, with parties every night and company all the time, and nothing to wear but that hideous black silk?

"Anne," called Mrs. Gray, as the young girl was about to close the front door and follow the others down the steps. "Wait a moment. I want to see you." She led Anne into the big drawing room. "Do you know that I am greatly in your debt, my child?" continued the old lady, as she drew Anne down beside her on the sofa. "I don't think I could ever possibly repay you for the good you have done me this autumn. But I am going to try, nevertheless, by making you a Christmas present before Christmas arrives. Now, when I was your age, I preferred clothes to other things. I think all young girls do; or, if they don't they are most unnatural. Therefore, child, I have decided to pay off some of my indebtedness to you by get-

ting my dressmaker to make you some dresses, if it is agreeable to you. Why, what is this! My little girl crying?"

The tears were streaming down Anne's cheeks.

"You mustn't cry, my own child," sobbed Mrs. Gray. "For I always cry when I see other people doing it, and it's very bad for my old eyes, you know."

"You are so good to me!" said Anne. "It makes me cry because I'm so happy."

"Well, well!" exclaimed Mrs. Gray, drying her eyes and beginning to laugh. "What a couple of sillies we are, to be sure. Now go, Anne, to my dressmaker, Mrs. Harvey, who has orders to make you four dresses, two for evening and two for afternoon. Mrs. Harvey has good taste and will help you select them. But perhaps you will like the ones she and I looked at the other day. One of them I am sure you will admire. I chose it specially because it will give color to your pale cheeks."

"What is it, Mrs. Gray?" asked Anne eagerly.

"It's pink crepe de Chine, my dear."

And Anne held her breath to keep from crying again.

CHAPTER XII

MIRIAM PLANS A REVENGE

FOR weeks Miriam Nesbit had felt a sullen resentment toward her brother, David, because he persisted in being friends with at least two of the girls in Oakdale High School whom she disliked most.

When he announced, one morning at breakfast, that he had been included in Mrs. Gray's house party, his sister suddenly burst into tears of passionate rage.

"Please don't cry, Miriam, old girl," said David, who was not of a quarrelsome disposition. "I'm awfully sorry if I hurt you, but, you know, Mrs. Gray was one of my earliest sweethearts."

Which was perfectly true. When David was a little boy he used to crawl through the garden hedge and call on the charming old lady nearly every day.

David had hoped that Miriam would laugh at this, but she stormed all the more, while poor Mrs. Nesbit looked wretched.

"It isn't Mrs. Gray," sobbed Miriam. "But to think that my own brother would associate with Grace Harlowe, who is always working

against me, and that common little Pierson girl whose sister takes in sewing!"

"Miriam, Miriam!" exclaimed Mrs. Nesbit, "I am shocked to hear you say such things. Because the girl is poor she is not necessarily common. Your grandfather was a poor man, too. He started his career as a machinist. You would never have had the money and position you have now if he had not become an inventor. Is it possible you would try to keep some one else from rising in life, when your own family struggled with poverty years ago?"

Miriam was silenced for a moment. She had seldom heard her mother speak so forcibly; but Mrs. Nesbit had seen, with growing misgivings, the innate snobbishness in her daughter's character, and for a long time she had been looking for an opportunity like the one that now presented itself.

David had risen during Miriam's contemptuous speech, and had turned very white; which was always a signal that his slow wrath had been kindled at last; but since he was a child he had had such admirable control of his feelings that it had often been remarked by older people. Miriam, however, knew the sign and resorted again to tears to draw attention to her own sufferings.

"You and mother have turned against me,"

she cried. "Mother, you have always loved David best, anyhow."

"Nonsense!" replied David. "You are a willful, selfish girl, jealous because a poor girl is getting ahead of you in your classes and because you are not included in the house party. Do you think Mrs. Gray would ask you to join those four nice girls in her house after that Miss Leece business? If you had learned to be polite and agreeable you would never have gotten into this state now." Having delivered himself of his opinion, and spent his rage, David walked out of the room and quietly closed the door after him.

"You see what you have done, Miriam," exclaimed Mrs. Nesbit. "You have made your brother angry. I have seldom seen him like that before, not since the stable man beat his dog. But don't cry, my child. It's all over now," and Mrs. Nesbit drew her daughter to her and stroked her hot forehead. "Why don't you give a house party, too?" she added after a moment's thought. "Would it give you any pleasure or help to heal your hurt feelings?"

"O mother!" exclaimed Miriam, looking up quickly. "I believe I *will* invite four girls and boys to spend Christmas week with me. Wouldn't it be fun?"

And it was in this manner that a plan for an

opposition house party sprang into existence; although the son of the house had joined the other side.

All through her preparations Miriam carefully guarded the secret that she was bitterly hurt at having been left out of Mrs. Gray's party, and she meditated a revenge that was still only a half-formed idea. In the first place, she chose Julia Crosby as one of the guests of the Christmas house party; Julia Crosby the tall, mischievous sophomore who had originated the "Black Monks of Asia." Surely the two together could work out some scheme which would bring her enemies to her feet and humble little Mrs. Gray, who had dared to slight her.

Meanwhile, the holidays were approaching. The crisp, cold air resounded with the jingle of sleigh bells, for snow had fallen the first week in December and all the sleighs in Oakdale were taken from their summer quarters.

The four chums were full of secret preparations. Grace had devised a scheme of entertainment which, in the town of Oakdale, would be unique, but it required much work and practice to perfect it. In the meantime Nora O'Malley had decided to entertain her friends at a bobbing party to start the Christmas holidays. And it was at this party that Miriam seized her first opportunity to make trouble.

"Anne, you are learned in many things, but not in outdoor fun," said Grace as the young people in mufflers and sweaters started to climb the long hill where the coasting was best.

"Do you mean to say you have never been coasting, Anne?" demanded David.

"I'm afraid I'll have to admit it," replied Anne. "To tell the truth, I never did have any fun, except reading, until I started in the High School and met all of you. You see, little city children are denied all these nice things unless they go to the parks, but it's no fun going alone."

"Well, you won't be alone now," said Hippy Wingate. "There are four to a sled, and we'll put you in the middle to keep you from getting lost in the snow."

"Look out, here comes some one!" called Grace, just as a small sled shot past them like a flash, with a laugh and a cheer from its occupants, Miriam and Reddy Brooks.

"They ought not to have done that," exclaimed David. "We couldn't see them over the knob of the hill and they might have run us down."

By this time they had reached the top of the hill, and Anne's heart bounded at the sight of the long, white track made by the sled which had just passed them and disappeared far below

across a flat meadow now smooth and hard as a table top.

"Don't be frightened, Anne," said David, who sat behind her on the sled.

He pinioned her arms with his own and with a wild whoop the four young people skimmed down the hill.

There was no time to be frightened, no time even to think, as they shot through the fine bracing air like a ball from a cannon. Before they knew it, they were landed at the bottom.

"O Hippy," cried Grace, her cheeks glowing like winter berries, "I feel as if I were riding the comet. But look out for the others," for the remaining sleds followed in quick succession and the air resounded with the whoops of the boys and girls as they shot past. "Is there any sport in the world that can touch it?" she demanded of the world in general.

Three or four more such rides, and Anne felt an exhilaration she had never before known. She was climbing the hill for a final trip before the party returned to Nora's for hot chocolate and sandwiches, when she heard some one cry out just behind her. She had lingered a little to watch the sleds pass, and had failed to notice a small sled with a single occupant come over the brow of the hill well out of the beaten path and make straight for her. It was Miriam Nes-

bit, riding flat on her stomach and going like the wind.

"Jump to the left, Anne," cried Grace's voice, "or you'll be hurt!"

Anne looked up and saw the sled. It all happened in a flash, and how David managed to get there first she never knew; but the next instant the two were rolling over and over in the snow with Miriam on top of them and a broken sled skidding on its back down the hillside.

"It was Miss Pierson's fault," exclaimed Miriam as she pulled herself out of the snow, and the others came running to the scene of the accident. "Why didn't she get out of the way? Inexperienced people ought not to come to bobbing parties. They always get hurt."

David was binding up a cut in his wrist, which was sprinkling the snow with blood. He was too angry to trust himself to answer his sister before the others just then. They had pulled Anne out of a snowdrift and she was leaning limply against Jessica, trying to collect her senses. It seemed to her that she had been walking well out of the sled track, out of everybody's way; but it didn't make any difference since nobody was killed.

"All I can say now, Miriam," said Grace, "is that you are entirely mistaken. If you hadn't hit Anne you'd have knocked me over. I was

walking just ahead of her and nobody can say I am inexperienced."

"Grace Harlowe, do you think I did it on purpose?" demanded Miriam furiously.

"I haven't insinuated anything, Miriam," replied Grace. "I simply wanted to disabuse your mind of a mistake. That was all." And she turned away from the angry girl.

All this time the other young people had said nothing. It was really an embarrassing situation, considering that David had not said a word either for or against his sister.

"I think we had better not coast any more to-night," said Nora, after a pause. "David has hurt his hand and Anne is so shaken that it would be well to give her something hot to drink. Come on, everybody."

"David, are you much hurt?" asked Grace uneasily.

"Nothing but a little cut," he said shortly, so shortly that Grace flushed. Perhaps he was angry with her for having spoken out to Miriam.

"I hope you aren't hurt much, David," said Miriam.

David made no reply.

"David," she repeated in a louder voice.

But her brother had started down the hill, his hands in his pockets. Nobody took much notice of Miriam as the young people followed

after him. Reddy Brooks was secretly congratulating himself that he hadn't been riding behind her on the sled as she had wished, insisting that she wanted to do the guiding herself. It was curious, he thought, and might have resulted in a serious accident, at least to Anne if David hadn't pulled her away. If Miriam had only thought to throw herself to the right when she saw Anne in the way. Girls had no heads, anyway, that is, most girls. Grace, he decided, was almost equal to a man for coolness and good judgment. But there were few girls who could touch Grace Harlowe; and he did a series of cartwheels in the snow to emphasize his feelings, to the relief of everybody present, for the silence was becoming uncomfortable.

"Nora," said Anne when they had reached town, "if you'll excuse me I think I'll go home. I'm a little tired."

"I'll take you home, Anne," said David, who had heard her remark. "I don't feel much like partifying either after this jolt. Come along, little girl," and he tucked Anne's arm in his and marched her off without another word.

"All my party is leaving before the party," cried Nora in despair.

"No, not all," replied Hippy Wingate. "There are still a few of us left, and I prom-

ise to drink any extra chocolate you may happen to have."

"Don't give the animals sweets, Nora," exclaimed Reddy. "Especially the hippopotamus. He has a delicate stomach. You see, his keeper used to feed him chocolate drops three times a day."

Hippy grinned good-naturedly. He was a round roly-poly boy, famous for his appetite.

"Get away from here, Red Curls," he cried, hitting Reddy in the back with a snowball.

"Oh, you coward," cried Reddy, talking in a high falsetto voice, "to hit a man when his back is turned. I'll slap you for that," and he landed a snowball on Hippy's chest.

Hippy crouched behind the girls.

"I was a fool to throw at a pitcher," he cried; "he'll be sending me one of his curves in a minute."

"Hiding behind the ladies, hey?" returned Reddy, beginning to pitch snowballs at the girls.

"Let's wash his face," cried Nora to the other boys and girls coming up just then. They chased Reddy all the way to Nora's house and rolled him in the snow until he cried "enough."

Once inside Nora's cozy home, the coasters were soon doing ample justice to the good things to eat, which Nora's sister had prepared for them. Although all three of Anne's chums re-

gretted deeply the unpleasant affair on the hill it was not mentioned again during the evening. Still, each girl felt in her heart that poor little Anne had, in Miriam Nesbit, a dangerous enemy.

CHAPTER XIII

CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS

"HERE'S the tack-hammer, Hippy, and don't fall off the ladder, please," cautioned Grace, as she assisted Hippy Wingate to tack up an evergreen garland in Mrs. Gray's drawing room.

Not in twenty years had the old house taken on such holiday attire. Great bunches of holly and cedar filled the vases and bowls and decorated the chandeliers. Fires blazed on every hearth and the warm glow from many candles and shaded lamps brightened the fine old rooms.

"My dear young people," exclaimed Mrs. Gray, coming in just then, "how happy you make me feel! I do wish you were all really my children and could forever stay just the ages you are now."

"This house would be like the palace of everlasting youth, then, wouldn't it, Mrs. Gray?" suggested Anne.

"Until some meddlesome little Pandora came

along, opened the box and let all the troubles out," interposed David, who was still feeling very bitter toward his sister Miriam, and glad to leave home for a time until his anger had cooled.

"Ah, well, we have no Pandoras here," answered Mrs. Gray, smiling on the young guests. "You are all girls and boys after my own heart, and I trust we shall have a beautiful time together. But here comes that nephew of mine, Tom Gray. I wonder if he's grown out of all recollection."

While she was speaking one of the town hacks had driven up to the steps, and there was a violent ring at the bell.

"Mr. Thomas Gray," announced the old butler at the door and Tom Gray, who had been the subject of endless speculation and conjecture, entered the room.

"If he turns out to be disagreeable or stupid or anything," the girls had been whispering, "it would be such a pity because everybody else is so nice."

Neither had the boys felt inclined to be prepossessed in Tom Gray's favor. He was a stranger, from New York, older than themselves and in college.

"I wish he wasn't going to butt in with his city manners," Reddy Brooks was thinking re-

gretfully. "He is sure to have a swelled head and try to boss the crowd."

They had pictured him as a sort of dandy, with needle-toed patent leather shoes and a coat cut in at the waist and padded over the shoulders.

Even David had voiced a few thoughts on the subject of Tom Gray.

"I'll bet he's an English dude," he said. For Mrs. Gray's nephew had spent most of his life in England. "He'll probably carry a cane and wear a monocle."

They were not surprised, therefore, when a young man entered the room who bore out somewhat the picture they had conjured. He was tall and slender, very dapper and rather ladylike in his bearing. His alert, dark eyes were set too close together, and his face had a narrow, sinister look that made them all feel uncomfortable. He spoke with a decided English accent, in a light, flippant voice which sent a quiver of dislike up and down David's spine, and made Reddy Brooks give his right arm a vigorous twirl as if he would have liked to pitch something at the young man's head.

Mrs. Gray was the most surprised person in the room. It must be remembered that she had not seen her nephew since he was a child, and she had hoped for better things than this.

However, always the most courteous and loyal of souls, she now made the best of the situation and greeted the newcomer cordially, though she did not bestow upon him the motherly kiss she had been saving.

Tom Gray bowed low over his aunt's hand.

"You are so much changed, Tom; I should hardly have known you," exclaimed the old lady, trying to conceal her disappointment and dismay. "England has weaned you away from your own country. You look as if you had just stepped out of Piccadilly."

"And so I have, aunt," replied the young man, using a very broad "a." "I have been in this country only a few months. England is the only place in the world for me, you know. I can't bear America."

Hippy Wingate gave himself an angry shake, which made all the ornaments on the mantelpiece rattle ominously.

"You must let me introduce you to my young friends, Tom," said Mrs. Gray, changing the subject quickly.

The introductions having been accomplished, she took his arm and led the way back to dinner.

"Do you think we can stand him for a week?" whispered David to Grace, as they followed down the hall.

"We'll have to," replied Grace, "or hurt Mrs. Gray's feelings. But isn't he the limit?"

"Asinine dandy!" hissed Hippy.

"I knew he'd be a Miss Nancy," exclaimed Reddy.

The girls did not express their disappointment, but as the meal progressed the conversation was strained and stupid.

"How did you leave your cousins in England, Tom?" asked Mrs. Gray, trying to keep the ball rolling and inwardly wishing she had never asked her nephew down.

"Quite well, thank you, aunt," replied Thomas Gray. "I expect to leave this beastly country and join them very soon."

"Indeed?" answered Mrs. Gray, flushing and with difficulty keeping back the tears of disappointment. To think a nephew of hers could have turned out like this!

"Do you play football?" demanded Hippy abruptly.

"Really, I don't care for the game," answered Thomas. "It's awfully rough, don't you know."

"Perhaps you prefer baseball?" suggested Grace.

"No," continued the young man, "I can't say I do. The truth is, I don't like outdoor games at all."

"What do you like, then?" demanded Nora, giving him a glance of ineffable scorn.

"I like afternoon tea," he answered, "and bridge."

Reddy almost groaned aloud, but he remembered his manners and choked his outburst of disgust.

"It is a pity," said Tom's aunt, turning her nearsighted blue eyes on him in amazement and displeasure. "Our Oakdale boys are all athletes. Even David here, the scholar and inventor, I'll venture to say, knows football and baseball as well as his friends."

"I'm not much of an inventor, Mrs. Gray," protested David. "You know my airship tumbled down before it got half way across the gym. But I shall never lose hope."

"Ah, airships?" exclaimed Thomas Gray, and deliberately taking a monocle from his pocket, he stuck it in his eye and stared at David, who choked and sputtered in his glass of water, while Hippy dropped a fork that fell on his plate with a great clatter.

Mrs. Gray raised her lorgnette and looked at her nephew.

"Thomas," she said sternly, "don't wear that thing here. It's not the custom in this town or in this country, for that matter. If you are nearsighted, buy yourself a pair of spectacles."

"Certainly, aunt, certainly; it shall be as you wish," replied Thomas, without a tinge of embarrassment. "I am so unused to America, you know."

Then Nora relieved the painful situation by laughing. She was taken with the giggles and she laughed till the tears rolled down her cheeks. The others laughed, too, even Mrs. Gray, who felt that she might give way to hysterics at any moment.

After dinner Thomas Gray detained his aunt in another room, while the girls and boys returned to the parlor. The two were closeted together for some time, and when they finally appeared, Mrs. Gray looked strangely flushed and nervous. But there was a smile on her nephew's thin lips and a dangerous flicker in his crafty eyes.

"I'll stake my last cent he's been getting money out of his poor little aunty," said David to Grace. "He's just the kind to do it."

"Poor Mrs. Gray!" exclaimed Grace. "I am so sorry for her. You can't think how she's been planning this party for months. Why did she ever ask down that wretch of a nephew? David, do try and make friends with him. Maybe there's something good in him after all, and it will help things along if Mrs. Gray feels that we want to like him."

"All right," promised David. "It goes against my grain to talk with a Miss Nancy dandy like that. It gives me a feeling in my chest like indigestion and bronchitis combined—but I'll make the effort."

So he went over and joined the Anglo-American, and began to talk with him in an easy, friendly sort of way.

"Won't you come over by the fire," he said. "I think we are going to play some games the girls have planned."

"Thanks, no," said the other, stifling a yawn. "I think I'll retire. I've had a long journey and I'm awfully knocked out. By the way, old chap," he continued, coming closer to David and whispering in his ear, which made that sensitive young man draw back with a quiver of dislike, "you couldn't favor me with a few dollars, could you? I left my check book in my portmanteau, which is still on the way and I find I haven't a cent. I'll return it to-morrow."

David regarded him with amazement. Here was a man whom he had met only an hour before, already trying to borrow money from him. Schoolboys are not likely to have money about them, but David did happen to have five dollars in his pocket.

"Certainly," was all he said, as he handed over the money.

The transaction had only taken a moment and when David drew out the five dollar bill, he was careful not to let anyone see him do it. However, Mrs. Gray, who had been out of the room, returned at the very moment the money was changing hands. In a flash she saw what her nephew had done. Without stopping to think she made straight for the two young men.

"Tom Gray," she said, speaking too low for anyone except her nephew and David to hear, "how dare you ask me for money and then borrow from one of my guests? You are a disgrace to your father, and to the name of Gray! I am ashamed of you and I command you to give that money back to David instantly.

Tom Gray was as angry as his aunt. His face went from red to white, and he looked as if he would like to break a vase or tear something to pieces.

" 'Eavens, awnt, don't make a scene. I wouldn't a' awsked 'im, h'if I 'adn't needed more money. I'll pay him to-morrow."

Mrs. Gray and David were too surprised to speak. It was plain that, when Tom Gray was angry, he dropped his h's.

David looked at him curiously, then he drew the old lady's arm through his.

"Don't bother, Mrs. Gray," he said. "It was only a small loan, and I was glad to be of

service. I believe Mr. Gray wants to go to bed now. He just said he was very tired. Shall I take him up?"

"If you will," replied Mrs. Gray, quieting down. "His room is next yours, David. Will you show him the way?"

"Young people," she said, going across to the boys and girls, who had gathered around the fire and were laughing and talking in low voices, "would you mind if we all went up early to-night? I feel a little out of sorts—bewildered—I don't know what. Children change so as they grow up," she added, sighing.

The poor old lady's eyes filled with tears. She slipped her arm around Anne's waist.

"You will never change, my dear boys and girls. You will all grow into fine men and women, I feel certain, and be devoted citizens of this splendid country of ours, which has always been good enough for our mothers and fathers, and ought to be quite good enough for us."

"Three cheers for America!" cried Hippy Wingate, giving his plump figure a twist like a whirling dervish.

Mrs. Gray laughed.

"Yes, indeed, my dears, America is a splendid country and every American should be proud to say so."

"And Oakdale is one of the nicest places in America," piped up Anne.

"Hurrah for Oakdale!" cried Hippy again.

"And Oakdale High School!" added Anne.

"And hurrah for the sponsor of the freshman class!" exclaimed Grace.

Whereupon they formed a circle, with Mrs. Gray in the middle, and danced about her laughing and singing:

"Hurrah for Mrs. Gray!"

The pretty, little old lady beamed happily upon her adopted family, as she called them.

"My darling children!" she cried. "Kiss me good night, every one of you, and we'll all go up to our beds."

CHAPTER XIV

A MIDNIGHT ALARM

THE dry, cold air of the outdoors, and the warm fires inside the old house, certainly had the effect of making a very sleepy crowd of boys and girls who were not sorry, after all, to turn in early.

Grace and Anne occupied a room together so large that it could easily have been turned into two apartments and each have been the size of ordinary bedrooms.

"I'm glad our beds are close together, anyway," said Grace. "The rest of the furniture in this room seems to be miles apart."

Mrs. Gray's room was just in front; Nora and Jessica were in a smaller one back of theirs, and across the hall were the boys' rooms.

"Isn't it a wonderful old house?" replied Anne. "I never slept in such a big room in all my life. And how kind Mrs. Gray is! There is nothing she hasn't remembered."

Each girl had found on her bed a pretty dressing gown of silk and wool and beside it a pair of bedroom slippers. There was a bowl of fruit on a table, and just before they dropped off to sleep a maid brought in a tray of glasses with a pitcher of hot milk.

"Mrs. Gray says this will warm you up before you go to bed," explained the maid.

"Dear, sweet Mrs. Gray," continued Anne, as she curled up on a rug before the fire to sip the warm drink, "she has planned so many things for this party. I am so sorry she has been disappointed."

"He's not a bit like her, Anne," replied her friend, not caring to mention names. "I do wish she had never asked him."

"My only hope," said Anne, "is that we will all seem so young and childish to him that he will get bored and leave."

"Well, just strictly between us and as man to man, as David is always saying, don't you think he is horrid? He has no manners at all, and it's hard to believe he's a product of the Gray family."

"He has such shifty eyes," said Anne, "and I had a feeling that his dislike for America was all put on to shock us. I feel so warm and sleepy," she continued drowsily when the lights were put out and they had snuggled down in the soft, comfortable beds.

"I heard him drop an 'h' once," whispered Grace, in a sleepy voice.

But there was no reply. Anne was already dreaming of her four beautiful new dresses.

It might have been midnight, perhaps a little later when Grace awoke with a start. Not a sound disturbed the peace of the old house except the ticking of the clock on the mantel and the occasional crackling of dying embers in the fireplace. Yes; there was one sound and it aroused her. A loose board creaked in the floor, or was it a door which opened and closed softly? Perhaps it was nothing after all. And she closed her eyes and drew the eiderdown quilt close about her shoulders.

No; there it was again. A distinct footfall. She raised herself on her elbow and peered into the shadows. Far over at the other side of the

chamber—it seemed an infinite distance just then—stood a figure. Grace looked at it calmly. She had never been a coward and she was not frightened now, only she wondered who could be invading their room at this hour. Perhaps Mrs. Gray; perhaps one of the servants. No, it was neither; of course it couldn't be because it was the figure of a man. She saw him now plainly enough hovering over the dressing table.

A small, cold hand slipped into hers. Anne was awake too. She had seen the figure and lay quite still watching it. Grace silently returned the pressure; then the two lay watching the man's stealthy motions for a moment, while Grace's mind was busy devising a plan by which the robber might be caught.

Oakdale was a quiet, prosperous place, and burglars were unusual. Occasionally the hands in the silk mills made a disturbance, and there had been a few highway robberies, but an actual house-breaker seldom troubled the law-abiding town. The two girls, as they lay watching him from under the covers, guessed that this man was a real burglar. He wore a black soft hat and carried a small electric lantern, while, with a practised hand, he picked the lock of a small drawer in the dressing table where the girls had put their purses. Once he turned the light toward the beds. Instantly the girls' eyelids

dropped and they lay as still as mice. Having satisfied himself that all was well, the prowler went on with his work, finally tiptoeing into the front room where Mrs. Gray was sleeping. Evidently he had made a circuit of the three bedrooms on that side of the house. As he slipped out Grace leaped from the bed. Now was the time for action. Putting on her dressing gown and slippers she dashed to the door leading into the hall, only to come upon the burglar again who had probably been frightened in his last venture and had retired to the hall for safety.

Fortunately he was standing with his back to her while he closed the door, and feeling that she was safe for the moment, she crouched in the shadow of the doorway. The thief evidently thought he also was safe, for he seized a large, heavy-looking valise from the floor and made straight for the steps without looking to right or left.

Now a door across the hall opened and another figure appeared. Grace trembled for a moment, fearing it might be another thief. She had always heard they traveled in pairs. But it was David, wrapped in a long gray dressing gown, looking for all the world like a monk.

He glanced up and down the hall for a moment, then tapped on the door of the next room and without waiting for an answer walked in. In

an instant he was out again and had started swiftly down the stairs, Grace following him. She had intended to speak to him, but it had all taken place so quickly there was no time. David made straight for the dining room, opening the heavy door. The room was brightly lighted. In a flash, Grace saw on the table a pile of the beautiful Gray silver, brought over from England by past generations of Grays. Grace never knew what instinct prompted her to enter the dining room by the butler's pantry at the very end of the long hall. As she pushed the swinging door, she heard David say:

"You low blackguard, what do you mean by stealing your aunt's silver?"

Grace started at the mention of the word "aunt." It was, then, the wretched Tom Gray who was robbing his own relative!

"Get out!" returned the other coldly, "and attend to your own business. You are only a kid."

"Give up those things you have stolen, or I'll pound you to a jelly!" cried David, making a rush at the burglar, who dodged nimbly.

Then Grace had an inspiration, which assuredly saved David from very disagreeable consequences. Real burglars, like rattlesnakes, are not likely to be dangerous except when they are disturbed. It is then that they become dan-

gerous characters. Grace slipped back into the pantry, swiftly opened one of the linen drawers and drew forth what turned out later to be a breakfast cloth, which was lucky because it was small and easy to manage.

When, in the next instant, she had pushed the door open, what she saw made her blood run cold. Tom Gray had whipped out a small pistol and pointed it straight at David's head.

"Get out of here, quick!" he said just as Grace opened the table cloth with a jerk and flung it over his head. A pistol shot rang out, but David had dodged in time and the bullet was buried in the mahogany wainscot back of him. The astonished burglar dropped the weapon, and began to struggle violently to release himself.

Instantly David pinioned his arms from the back. But the fellow might even then have struggled free, if Reddy Brooks and Hippy Wingate had not burst into the room, followed by Anne, who had roused them after Grace had gone. The three boys swiftly overpowered Tom Gray and tied him to a chair with cord Grace had found in the pantry.

But now, what was to be done? Undoubtedly the noise would awaken Mrs. Gray and she would have to be told that her nephew was a burglar about to make off with the family silver.

Perhaps the loss of the silver would hurt less than family disgrace.

In the midst of their council Mrs. Gray herself appeared.

"What in the world is the matter?" she demanded.

No one replied for a moment. It was a very uncomfortable situation for the young guests of the house party. If only the burglar had not been a member of the Gray family!

Then Tom Gray himself spoke.

"I must say this is a nice 'ospitable way to treat a guest and a relation. 'Ere I am taken by a lot of silly children for a burglar. I, your own nephew, awnt, who 'ad come down stairs on the h'innocent h'errand of finding some h'ice water.

Mrs. Gray looked from one to another of the silent group. Her eyes took in the silver piled on the table, the pistol on the floor and the burglar's tools and lantern.

"You are a burglar," she said, "a wretched, common thief. I knew it as soon as you entered my house last night. I could not then explain the feeling of repugnance I had, but I know now what it meant. I shall not offer hospitality to a coward, for all thieves are cowards. Boys, take what he has stolen from his pockets."

Reddy and Hippy searched the bulging

pockets of the thief's coat and waistcoat, and brought forth a quantity of jewelry, watches and purses.

"Now, David," continued Mrs. Gray, firmly, "be kind enough to give me that pistol."

David obeyed her, wondering if she meant to shoot her own nephew.

Mrs. Gray pointed the pistol at the thief with as steady a hand as if she had been shooting at targets all her life.

"Untie the cords," she commanded.

They cut the cords with a carving knife.

"Now, go!" said the old lady, still pointing the pistol at his head. "Leave my house quickly. I shall not punish you, because a thief is always punished sooner or later."

Tom Gray looked immensely relieved, Grace thought, in spite of his crestfallen, hangdog air. They followed him down the hall, Mrs. Gray in the lead, until he slammed the front door after him and disappeared in the night.

Then, turning with her old, sweet manner, she continued:

"My dear children, I want to thank you for helping me rid my house of this man. I know I can depend on all of you never to mention it to anyone. It would have been a great blow to me if I had not been so angry; but now let us all go to our beds and forget this horrid episode.

To-morrow we shall be as happy as ever. I am determined it shall not interfere with our good time."

CHAPTER XV

TOM GRAY

THE company which met around the breakfast table, next morning, was entirely restored to its old gayety. There was not one member of the house party, including Mrs. Gray herself, who did not feel unbounded relief that the place was so well rid of Tom Gray.

David was glad there had been no arrest, and that the mistress of the house had with so much dignity and spirit turned out the culprit. It would have been a bad business, testifying in court against Mrs. Gray's nephew when he had been visiting in her house.

"Mrs. Gray," suggested Grace, "if you haven't made any plans this morning for us, I think we had better spend an hour or so rehearsing our surprise."

"Very well, my dear, you may spend as much time as you like at it; but if I peep over the transom, or listen through a crack in the door, you mustn't scold. I don't know that I can wait much longer to find out what it is."

"No, no! You're not to come near the third story," protested Grace. "We shall nail down the transom and stuff the keyhole with soap if you do."

"I never could stand suspense," exclaimed the old lady, shaking her head until her lace breakfast cap, with its little bows of lavender ribbon, quivered all over. "I fear I shall be tempted to break into the room before Christmas night and unearth the whole business. But tell me this much. Who is in the surprise?"

"All of us," declared Nora. "But now we'll have to get somebody to take the place of——"

She paused and blushed scarlet.

"Mr. Thomas Gray," announced the old butler at the door, with a peculiar expression on his countenance.

There was a dead silence. Mrs. Gray sat as if turned to stone, while David half rose from his seat and Hippy seized a bread and butter knife to plunge into the heart of his enemy, if necessary.

"Aunt Rose," cried a voice outside, "aren't you glad to see me?"

A broad-shouldered, well-built young man walked into the room and kissed the old lady right in the mouth, before she could say a word. He had a sunburned, wholesome face, kindly gray eyes, light-brown hair, and wore a heavy

suit of rough, blue cloth. He carried no cane; neither were his shoes pointed at the toes, and there wasn't a tinge of English in his accent except that his enunciation was unusually good.

Mrs. Gray rose from her chair and examined the young man long and carefully.

"The very image of your uncle," she cried at last, and gave him a good hug. "The very image, my dear Tom. Your old aunty has been a most egregious fool. Why didn't you come last night?"

"Didn't you get my telegram? I sent it in good time. I was delayed and had to take the night train up. I am awfully sorry if it inconvenienced you."

"You haven't inconvenienced me, my boy, except for a slight loss of sleep, and a fright and a narrow of escape from losing the family silver, which David and Grace, here, prevented."

Then Mrs. Gray sat down and burst out laughing. The others joined in and for a few minutes the breakfast table was in an uproar.

The real Tom Gray, who was the image of his uncle's portrait over the sideboard, looked from one to another of the strange faces and then began to laugh too, since it seemed to be the proper thing to do. He had one of those delightful, hearty laughs that ring out in a whole roomful of voices. When Mrs. Gray heard it

she stopped short, patting her nephew on the cheek; for he was sitting beside her now in a place hastily arranged by the butler.

"Exactly your uncle's laugh. It's good to hear it again. You're a Gray, every inch of you; and, thank God, you're a fine fellow! If you had come down here with an English accent and no 'h's' and a monocle, I should have shut the door in your face. I should, indeed."

"Who, me?" demanded her nephew, forgetting his grammar in his surprise at such a state of affairs. "Not me, dear aunt. America's good enough for me. I've had lots of good times with my English cousins, but America's my home and country."

"Hurrah!" cried Hippy, dashing around the table and seizing the young man's hand. "We're glad to know you. We're proud and happy to make your acquaintance."

There was such an uproar of fun and laughter at this that Tom Gray began at last to see that something had really happened, and that his sudden and unheralded appearance had brought immense relief to the assembled company.

"Don't you think it's time somebody put me on?" he asked finally when the noise had quieted down a little.

"Tom," replied his aunt, "did you tell any-

one you were coming to Oakdale for Christmas to visit me?"

"Why, yes," answered Tom after a moment's thought. "I believe I did. In fact I know I did. I was staying for a week in New York, with an English friend, Arthur Butler. I told him all about it. It was on his account that I stayed over one night. I sent the telegram by his servant, Richards."

"Ah, ha!" cried Mrs. Gray. "And pray tell us what that wretch of a servant looked like."

Tom laughed.

"Richards is quite an unusual fellow, a good servant I believe, but rather effeminate and a kind of a dandy——"

"That's the man!"

"He's the one!"

"The very fellow!"

Half a dozen voices interrupted at once.

Then Mrs. Gray explained the rather serious adventure of the night before. She ended by saying:

"I never, in my heart of hearts, really believed he was you, Tom, dear."

"The scoundrel!" exclaimed the young man. "Can't we set the police on him?"

"The police in Oakdale are slow, Tom," replied his aunt. "Slow from lack of occupation. Robbers do not flock here in great numbers."

"At least, I'll telegraph to Arthur Butler," said Tom, "and warn him. They may catch him from that end."

The telegram was accordingly sent. Likewise the police were notified, but Richards, who turned out to be a well-known English crook, made good his escape and was heard from no more.

It did not take our young people long to make the acquaintance of the real Tom Gray, nor to decide he was a fine fellow and one they could admit to their circle without regret.

"He's like a breath of fresh air," thought Grace, and indeed it was disclosed later that he intended to study forestry because he loved the country and the open air, and spent all his vacations camping out and taking long walking trips. But there was nothing of the gypsy in him. He was full of energy and ambition and infused such a wholesome vigor into whatever he did that the young people felt a new enthusiasm in his presence.

"I propose to celebrate the return of the real Tom Gray," announced Mrs. Gray, "by sending my boys and girls off on a sleighing party this afternoon. The big old sleigh holds exactly eight. Reddy, you may drive, since the roads are so familiar to you. You must all be back at six o'clock, for, remember, to-night we deco-

rate the Christmas tree and every girl freshman in Oakdale High School must have a present on it."

Just after lunch, therefore, after a hard morning's work over Mrs. Gray's "surprise," the young people bundled into the big side-seated sleigh, and tucked the buffalo robes tightly around them. The horses snorted in the crisp, dry air; there was a jingle of merry sleigh bells as off they started down the street toward the open country.

Jingle bells, jingle bells,
Jingle all the way.
Oh, what fun 'tis to ride
In a one-horse open sleigh.

they sang as they bowled over the well-beaten track; and Tom Gray breathed a sigh of pure delight.

"Isn't this great!" he exclaimed. "Wouldn't you rather do this than write an essay or study Latin prose composition?"

"Next to riding in an airship and skating, it's the finest thing I know of," answered David.

"Have you ever ridden in an airship?" demanded Tom.

"No, but I intend to," replied the other; for David had never for a moment relinquished his pet scheme, but worked on his experiments whenever he had a spare moment; little dream-

ing that one day he was to become the talk of the town.

As the sleigh passed the Nesbit house, Miriam and some of her friends were just entering her front gate. She saw the party and a shadow of black jealousy darkened her face.

"Why don't we do the same thing?" she exclaimed aloud, and in another twenty minutes she had bundled her own guests into the Nesbit sleigh, while she herself took the reins and guided the pair of spirited black horses.

"Miriam, I do wish you would let one of the boys drive," said her mother, who had come to the door to see her off.

"I prefer to do the driving, mother," replied the spoiled girl, and with a crack of the whip, the second sleighful was off after the first. It was not long before the Nesbit sleigh had met and passed the other, which was not going at a very great rate of speed. Mrs. Gray's carriage horses were much older and more staid than Miriam's pair of young blacks.

"Who is the girl in front?" asked Tom, as the sleigh flashed past.

"My sister," answered David shortly.

"She must be a pretty good driver," observed Tom.

David made no reply. He knew perfectly well that Miriam was not strong enough to hold

in the black team, once the horses got the upper hand; but he hoped one of the boys would take the reins if they showed any symptons of running away.

The early twilight was just falling when the Gray house party came to a narrow, rickety old bridge spanning the bed of a creek. Here they stopped the horses for a time, while Grace and Hippy gathered some branches of evergreen growing on the edge of a wood, just over the bridge.

Suddenly the stillness was broken by the sound of bells ringing so violently that it seemed as if all Bedlam had broken loose. Around a curve and down the road in front of them loomed Miriam's blacks, making straight for the other group. They were going like the wind, and the empty sleigh, lying on its side, was clattering behind them.

"Jump, girls!" cried Tom, while with the other boys he started to cross the bridge to intercept the horses.

If Grace had paused to reflect she might never have attempted accomplishing the daring deed that suggested itself to her. Quickly snatching off her scarlet cape, she dashed into the middle of the road, waving it before her. Perhaps the horses also thought Bedlam had been let loose. At sight of the terrifying apparition,

they slackened up, snorted and reared backward.

"She is a brave girl," thought Tom Gray, as he leaped at the nearest rearing, plunging animal, while David seized the other. Far down the road came the sound of a faint halloo.

"I'll pick up the others. I suppose they are in a drift," said Reddy, as he drove off and in a few minutes returned carrying Miriam and her party. Miriam herself looked white and frightened, although she pretended to treat the affair lightly.

"A rabbit scared the horses," was all she said. "I'll let one of the boys drive us home."

"Indeed, I shan't go back in that sleigh," cried Julia Crosby.

"Perhaps you'll accept a ride in the freshman sleigh, Miss Crosby," suggested Nora; and the other girl, somewhat ashamed, was obliged to place herself at the mercy of her enemies.

"All of you girls get into Mrs. Gray's sleigh," commanded David, "and Tom and I will drive the other sleigh back." No one ever cared to disobey David when he spoke in this tone. Even his wilful sister took her seat between Grace and Anne without a word and never spoke during the entire drive back, except to say good night at her own front gate.

But Grace could not refrain from one sharp little thrust.

"You seem to be unlucky with sleighs and sleds both, Miriam," she said.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MARIONETTE SHOW

DO you remember your first party dress? How it gave a glimpse of the throat and neck, and seemed to sweep the ground all around, although it merely reached your shoe tops?

Did you feel a thrill of pleasure when the last hook and eye was fastened and you surveyed yourself in the longest mirror in the house?

So it was with Anne in her pink crepe de Chine. Or was it really Anne, this little vision in rose color with glowing cheeks and sparkling eyes? She stood spellbound before the glass on that memorable Christmas night, and no one disturbed her for awhile. Mrs. Gray and the girls had stolen out so as not to embarrass the young girl who, for the first time, saw herself in a beautiful new silk dress exactly the color of pink rose petals, which hung in soft folds to the tips of her small pink satin slippers.

"Give her a chance, girls," whispered Mrs. Gray. "We mustn't be too enthusiastic about the difference. It might hurt her tender little feelings. But she *does* look sweet, doesn't she?"

"As pretty as a picture, Mrs. Gray," answered Grace, kissing the old lady's peach blossom cheek. "But they are coming. I hear them on the walk. We must get behind the scenes and see that everything is all ready."

The big drawing room of the Gray house was soon full of young people watching the folding doors leading into the library with expectant faces. In the hall a string orchestra was discoursing soft music and the place was filled with the hum of conversation and low laughter. Mrs. Gray, seated on the front row, in the place of honor, occasionally looked about her and smiled happily.

"Why didn't I do this long ago?" she said to herself. "But then, were there ever before such nice girls as my four adopted daughters?"

Miriam sat near, with the other members of her house party. It had been a source of much discussion whether or not to admit Julia Crosby to the freshman party. But, since she was Miriam's guest, what else was there to do?

"We shall be only heaping coals of fire on her head at any rate," hinted Jessica, "and that cer-

tainly ought to make her feel worse than if she had been left out."

After everyone was comfortably seated three loud raps were heard from behind the folding doors. Some one began to play "The Funeral March of a Marionette" on the piano, and the doors slid slowly back.

There was a murmur of surprise and wonder.

Two curtains had been stretched across the door opening above and below and two hung down at each side, leaving an oblong space in the middle in which stood a little doll theater nearly a yard and a half long and a yard high. A row of footlights across the miniature stage presently blossomed into light, and the freshman girls smiled as they recognized some of those same little bulbs that had served to illuminate the pumpkin face of Miss Leece's effigy. The music ceased and the curtains rolled back. There sat Cinderella by the kitchen fire, very stiff and straight, but weeping audibly with her little fists in her eyes. She was ten inches high and, on careful examination, it could be seen that two threads attached to her arms, and another to the back of her neck, made it possible for her to move about and use her hands in a remarkably lifelike manner.

Wild applause from the audience. Well there might be, for the scene was perfect, from

the old brick fireplace with an iron pot steaming on the coals to the rows of shining pans and blue dishes on a shelf at the side, all of which came from a toy shop, along with a little kitchen bench and chairs.

The cruel sisters swept in, dressed for the ball. When they spoke there were convulsive titters among the guests for the voices of the cruel step-sisters were those of Nora and Hippy. Anne read the lines of Cinderella so plaintively that Mrs. Gray shed a secret tear or two when Cinderella was left alone in the gloomy old kitchen. When the fairy godmother appeared, in a peaked red hat and a long red cape, it was Jessica who spoke the lines in a sweet, musical voice. How Cinderella rolled out the pumpkin and displayed six white mice in a trap, and how, after a brief interval of total darkness, could be seen through the open door a coach of gold in which sat Cinderella in a silken gown, need not be related here. It all took place without a single slip and the dolls went through their parts with such funny lifelike motions that the boys and girls forgot they were not watching real actors.

It was the scene of the ballroom, however, which was the real triumph of the evening.

"How did those clever children ever do it?" exclaimed Mrs. Gray, aloud, when the curtain

rolled back and disclosed the ballroom of the palace, with a drop curtain at the back showing a vista of marble columns and pillars. A gilt chandelier was suspended in the middle, from which stretched garlands of real smilax. There were rows of little gilt chairs against the walls filled with dolls in stiff satins and brocades. And one large throne chair with a red velvet cushion in it, on which sat the prince, who spoke with the voice of David Nesbit, and entertained his guests in royal state. After the exciting arrival of Cinderella, Nora played a minuet on the mandolin, the tinkling music of which seemed best suited to the doll drama, and the prince and Cinderella executed a dance of such intricate steps and low bows that the audience was convulsed with laughter. There were even suppressed titters from behind the scenes. This dance, which had been devised by Tom Gray and Grace, necessitated two extra threads to manipulate the feet. It was most difficult and had required long and tedious practice, but the results were quite worth all the time and trouble.

Mrs. Gray laughed till the tears rolled down her cheeks and made a personal appeal for an encore, which was given; but there was a mishap this time; Cinderella's threads became entangled and she came near to breaking her china

nose. Audiences are invariably most pitiless when they are most pleased, and have no mercy on exhausted actors. At the cry of "Speech! Speech!" the Prince stepped forward and made a low bow.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "we thank you for your approval and if strength and breath permitted us, and the lady had not injured her nose, we would gladly dance again for you."

Then came the last scene. The step-sisters made desperate efforts to wear the slipper; Cinderella finally retired triumphantly on the prince's arm, and the curtains closed only to open again a few moments later upon a scene which bore a strong resemblance to Oakdale High School. The fairy godmother occupied the center of the stage while the entire company of dolls were lined up on either side. Cinderella and the prince, each held the end of an open scroll, which bore a printed inscription that could be seen by the audience. It read:

"A Merry Christmas to the Fairy Godmother of the Freshman Class."

A scene of wild enthusiasm followed. The young people gave three cheers for Mrs. Gray and ended with the High School yell. The actors came out and were cheered each in turn.

Grace, Tom Gray and Reddy had worked the

marionettes, it seemed, standing on the back of the table where the theater was placed, while the others, sitting on low stools at the sides where they could see and not be seen, read their lines which had been composed by Anne.

"It wasn't so hard as you might think," said Grace, explaining the marionettes to a group of friends. "Dressing the dolls was easy; we glued on most of their clothes, and we made the step-sisters ugly by giving them putty noses. Hippy painted the scenery and David supplied the electric lights. The threads that moved the arms and bodies were tied to little cross sticks something like a gallows, so that they could be held from above without being seen."

But the marionette show was only the beginning of the party. There was to be feasting and dancing, and, lastly, a big Christmas tree loaded with presents.

The floors were cleared. The notes of a waltz rang out, and away whirled the happy boys and girls. Anne and David, who did not dance, retired to a sofa in the library to look on.

"Are you happy, Anne, in your beautiful pink dress?" asked David, regarding her with open admiration.

"How can I help being happy?" she replied. "This is the first pretty dress that I have ever had and I never went to a party before, either."

"I never enjoyed a party before," said David, "but I'm enjoying this one. I hope, for Mrs. Gray's sake, it goes off without a hitch."

Just then Tom Gray waltzed by with Grace. They stopped when they saw their friends, and came back.

"Our efforts are certainly crowned with success," exclaimed Grace. "It's the most beautiful ball ever given in Oakdale. Everyone says so. By the way," she added, "get your partners and fall in line for the grand march to supper."

"I already have mine, all right," declared Tom Gray.

"And I think I have mine," observed David. "She's wearing a pink dress and is just about as tall as a marionette."

Anne laughed and stood on tiptoe to make herself look taller. Suddenly she caught the eye of Miriam Nesbit, who was lingering in the doorway, watching the scene with an expression that the circumstances and holiday surroundings hardly seemed to justify.

"I wonder if the party will go off without a hitch," thought Anne, as they joined the grand march into the dining room.

When the beautiful, illuminated tree had been disburdened of all its presents and the guests were well advanced on their supper, Mrs. Gray

approached Anne, carrying an oblong box, neatly done up in white tissue paper tied with red ribbons. Pinned to the ribbon with a piece of holly was a Christmas card on which was printed in fancy lettering "A Christmas Thought."

"Why, what is this, Mrs. Gray?" demanded Anne, rather excited, while many of the boys and girls gathered around her and some stood on chairs in order to see what the mysterious box contained.

"I know no more than you, dear," replied the old lady. "A man left it at the door a moment ago, and one of the servants gave it to me. Why don't you open it and see?"

Anne hesitated. Something told her not to open the box, but how could she help it with dozens of her friends waiting eagerly to see what was in it?

"Hurry up, Anne, aren't you curious to see what it is?" some one called.

"It looks like flowers," said another.

'Or candy," observed a third.

And still Anne's fingers lingered on the bow of red ribbon. Was there anyone in the world who could be sending her a box that night? Certainly not her mother nor her sister, nor any of her friends who had exchanged presents in the morning. Mrs. Gray evidently had not sent

it and there was no one else in her small list of friends who would have taken the trouble.

"Anne, you funny child, don't you see we are all waiting impatiently?" said Grace at last.

Anne slipped off the ribbons and opened the package. In the box was some object, carefully done up in more tissue paper.

"It looks like a mummy," exclaimed Hippy.

Untying the wrappers, Anne held up to the curious view of the others a large doll.

At first she hardly comprehended what it was and held it out at arms' length looking at it wonderingly. It was dressed as a man in a black suit with a long Prince Albert coat, very crudely made on close inspection, but still cut and fitted to give the right effect. The face had been cleverly changed with paint and putty, and pinned on the head was a black felt hat, constructed out of the crown of an old one evidently, in which had been sewn some lank black hair.

A card was tied around the doll's neck, and some one looking over Anne's shoulder read aloud the following inscription written upon it:

"Why have imitation actors when you can get real ones?"

Anne gave a gasp.

Who could have played this cruel trick upon her? She knew her four friends had never

spoken of the happenings of Thanksgiving night, but such secrets would leak out in spite of everything, and there may have been others in the audience who had recognized her. Moreover, her father himself would not have hesitated to tell who she was, so that it was not difficult to understand how the story had spread.

But who would have the heart to hold her father up to ridicule in this way, and to cause her such secret pain and unhappiness? While her thoughts were busy, David had seized the doll and wrapped it up again. He was very angry, but it was wiser to keep silent.

"What was it, dear?" demanded Mrs. Gray, who had not been able to hear the message written on the card.

"Just a silly trick on Anne, Mrs. Gray," replied David, for Anne was too near to tears to trust the sound of her own voice.

"Something about actors, wasn't it?" asked Julia Crosby, who was hovering near, and before she could be stopped, she had snatched the doll from Anne's lap. The covers fluttered to the floor and the others pressed eagerly around to get a glimpse of it.

David leaped to his feet so vigorously that he upset a chair.

"Give that back!" he commanded. "It is not yours."

"Give That Back! It Is Not Yours."

"I will not," answered Julia Crosby. "Neither is it yours."

"I say you will," cried David, furiously, losing his temper completely.

"Get it if you can!" challenged the girl, darting through the crowd with David at her heels.

Suddenly there was a crash, a startled cry and the great fir tree with all its ornaments and lighted candles fell to the floor.

CHAPTER XVII

AFTER THE BALL

YES, here was the hitch that Anne had secretly dreaded and which the other girls had anxiously hoped to avoid.

She had not dreamed what it would be, but she had felt it coming all evening, ever since she had seen Miriam hovering near the library door. And, in a way, Miriam was connected with the disaster. Had not Miriam's guest and chum exceeded all bounds of politeness by prying into other people's affairs? No doubt, as she fled from David, her dress had caught in one of the branches of the tree and so pulled it over.

All this darted through Anne's head as she stood leaning against the wall while the room

was fast filling with smoke and the pungent odor of burning pine.

Suddenly, some one at her elbow deliberately called "Fire! Fire!" These were the same ominous words she had heard Thanksgiving night, only they seemed now more alarming, more threatening. Who could be so foolish, so ill-advised as to scream those agitating words in a roomful of girls and boys already keyed up to a high pitch of excitement? Anne turned quickly and confronted Miriam.

"Don't do that!" exclaimed Anne. "You will only make matters worse."

Miriam looked at her scornfully, although it was evident she had not noticed her before.

"Be quiet, spy," she hissed, "and don't make trouble."

"I suspect you of making a great deal," returned Anne, calmly.

She was not afraid of this passionate, spoiled girl, and only the fact that Miriam was the sister of David, her devoted friend, kept Anne from saying more.

In another moment, the entire Christmas tree was in a bright blaze. Anne had climbed up to a chair, and thence to the table that the crowd had pushed against her as it ran. Anne was about to leap to the floor when Grace and Tom Gray dashed in with an armful apiece of wet

blankets. With the help of the others they spread the blankets over the burning tree and the blaze was extinguished almost as soon as it was born.

"No harm has been done," said Tom. "The canvas covering saved the floor and fortunately all the furniture has been taken out anyhow. It's all right, Aunt Rose. Nobody hurt; nothing damaged. I never heard of a more accomodating fire in my life."

"Open the windows now and let out the smoke," ordered Mrs. Gray, "and, if you have all finished eating, I think you had better come into the drawing room while the servants clear out this debris. Tom, please tell the musicians to play a waltz. I do not want my guests to carry away any unpleasant impressions of this house."

The music struck up and the dance began again.

"Well," said Grace, "no one need feel badly about the fire, because a Chrismas tree generally has to be burned, anyway, and nothing of value but the ornaments was destroyed. So everything is all right."

"It was all my fault," exclaimed David, in a contrite voice. "Mrs. Gray, you will have to forgive me before I can enjoy a clear conscience again. If it hadn't been for that lumbering

sophomore, Julia Crosby, I should never have lost my temper the way I did."

"My dear David," cried Mrs. Gray, patting him affectionately on the arm, "you couldn't do anything I would disapprove of. If you wanted to rescue Anne's doll I am sure you had some excellent reason for it."

Mrs. Gray had not heard the history of Anne's father, for Grace and her friends had kept the secret well, and Anne, herself, had never cared to tell the story. She was a quiet, reserved girl who talked little of her own affairs.

"He *did* have a good reason, Mrs. Gray," put in Grace, "and it was enough to make him lose his temper. Julia Crosby is everlastingly playing practical jokes and getting people into trouble. However, I don't suppose she upset the tree on purpose," she added, thoughtfully.

"Well, well," exclaimed Mrs. Gray, "let us forget all about it and wind up the party with a Virginia reel. Tom and Grace must lead it off, and Anne, you and David watch the others so that when it comes your turn you will be able to dance it yourselves."

So it was that Mrs. Gray's freshman Christmas ball ended as gayly as it had started, with a romping, joyous Virginia reel. There was not a soul, except the little old lady herself, who did not join the two long lines stretching from

one end of the rooms to the other and when it came Anne's turn, she was not afraid to bow and curtsey as the others had done, for she had quickly mastered the various figures of the dance. Moreover, was she not wearing a beautiful dress of pink crepe de Chine? After all a pretty dress does make a great difference. Anne felt she could never have danced so well in the old black silk.

When the reel was over the boys and girls joined hands and formed an immense circle about their charming hostess, whirling madly around her as they cried:

"Three cheers for Mrs. Gray!"

The old lady was very happy. She waved her small, wrinkled hands at them and called out over the din:

"Three cheers for my dear freshmen boys and girls!"

At length, when the hands of the clock pointed to two, and the last of the dancers had departed, Mrs. Gray sank into a chair exhausted.

"I am tired," she said, "but I never in my life had such a good time!"

Was there ever a girl in the world who did not want to exchange confidences with her best friends after a party?

Grace and Anne, therefore, were not surprised when two figures in dressing gowns and slippers

stole into their room, crouching on the rug before the fire.

"We've all sorts of things to say," exclaimed Nora, "else we wouldn't think of keeping you up so late. In the first place, wasn't it perfectly delightful?"

"Grand!" sighed the others.

"Everything except that one accident, and the thing that caused it," answered Grace.

"By the way, Anne, where is the doll?" asked Jessica.

Anne produced it from its box.

"Here it is," she said sadly. "But it was a cruel joke. Can you imagine who could have done it?"

"I have several suspicions," answered Grace, "but I make no accusations without grounds."

The four girls examined the doll carefully.

"My poor father!" exclaimed Anne, her eyes filling with tears.

"I'll tell you what, girls," cried Nora suddenly, "there's more to this than just Anne's secret. How did anyone know we were going to have a marionette show? Didn't we keep it dark?"

"Yes," they answered.

"Perhaps it got out through the servants," suggested Jessica.

"It certainly is rather an underhanded busi-

ness," cried Grace, "for whoever did this not only must have bribed one of Mrs. Gray's servants, but also must have some way or other raked up Anne's secret. It was evidently some one who had a grudge against you, poor dear," she added, patting Anne on the cheek.

"Girls!" exclaimed Jessica, who all this time had been looking the doll over carefully, "where have you seen this material before?" She pointed at the fancy red waistcoat the doll was wearing.

"It has a familiar look," answered Nora.

"It looks to me very much like a red velveteen suit I saw somewhere once upon a time," observed Grace.

"You did see it, Grace. But it was—how long ago? Two or more years, wasn't it?"

"I know," cried Nora. "Miriam Nesbit's!"

"Sh-h-h!" warned Grace. "Remember David. He's just across the hall."

"And he must never know," added Anne, "not if she sent me a dozen dolls."

"But I haven't finished," continued Jessica. "I feel exactly like a detective on the scent. This doll is wearing something else that is familiar to us all. Anne, you have seen it, I am sure."

They scanned the doll eagerly. The shabby black suit was made of some indescribable ma-

terial that might have come from anywhere. The red velveteen waistcoat they had already identified. Then came a little white cotton dickey, with a high standing collar and then——

"The tie!" cried Nora. "The green tie! Is that it, Jessica?"

"You are right," answered Jessica. "Have you never seen that green silk before?"

Grace was in a brown study.

Anne could not recall it and Nora was groping in the dark.

"I'll tell you this much," said Jessica, who loved a mystery; "It just matches a certain veil——"

"Miss Leece!" exclaimed Grace. "It's a piece of the trimming on an old dress she sometimes wears."

"Exactly," said Jessica. "Who, having once seen it could ever forget it?"

And so Miss Leece and Miriam had combined forces against poor little Anne!

CHAPTER XVIII

A WINTER PICNIC

"AUNT ROSE," exclaimed Tom Gray, several mornings after the Christmas dance, "I have a scheme; but, before I ask your permission to carry it out, I want you to grant it."

"Why do you ask it at all, then, Tom, dear?" answered his aunt.

"Because we want your seal and sanction upon the undertaking," replied Tom, giving the old lady an affectionate squeeze. "Is it granted, little Lady Gray?" he asked.

"I am merely groping about in the dark, my boy, but I trust to your good sense not to ask me anything too outrageous. Tell me what it is quickly, so that I may know exactly how deeply I am implicated.

"Well," said Tom, "here's the scheme in a nutshell. I want to give a picnic."

Mrs. Gray groaned.

"A picnic, boy? Whoever heard of a picnic in mid-winter. What mad notion is this?"

"But you have given your consent, aunty, and no honorable woman can go back on her word."

"So I have, child, but explain to me quickly

what a winter picnic is so that I may know the worst at once."

"A winter picnic is a glorious tramp in the woods, with a big camp-fire at noon, for food, warmth and rest, and then a tramp back again."

"And can I trust to you to take good care of my four girls? Anne and Jessica are not giants for strength. You must not walk them too far, or let them get chilled; and, if you find they are growing tired, you must bring them straight back."

"On my word of honor, as a gentleman and a Gray, I promise," said Tom, solemnly.

"And you will all be in before dark?" continued Mrs. Gray.

"We promise," continued the young people.

"Wear your stoutest shoes and warmest clothing," she went on.

"We promise," they cried.

"And we want a lot of lunch, aunt," said Tom coaxingly, "and some nice raw bacon for cooking and eating purposes."

"You shall have everything you want," said Mrs. Gray, "but who will carry the lunch?"

"We will distribute it on the backs of our four pack mules," replied Grace. "But Hippy must carry the coffeepot. He's not to be trusted with food."

"Now, wouldn't it be a remarkable sight to

see a pack mule eating off his own back?" observed Hippy. "There are several animals that can turn their heads all the way around, I believe, but not the human animal."

"We had better start as soon as possible," broke in Tom. "Hurry up, girls, and get ready, while the servants fix the lunch."

In half an hour eight young people, well muffled and mittened, started off toward the open country. It was a clear, cold day and the snow-covered fields and meadows sparkled in the sunshine.

"If I were a gypsy by birth, as well as by inclination," declared Tom, as they trudged gayly along, "I should take to the road in the early spring, and never see a roof again until cold weather."

"But being a member of a respectable family and about to enter college, you have to sleep in a bed under cover?" added David.

"It's partly that," said Tom, "and partly the cold weather that is responsible for my good behavior two thirds of the year. If I lived in a warm climate all the year around, every respectable notion I had would melt away in a week and I'd take to the open forever."

"I have never been in the woods in the winter time," said Anne. "Are they very beautiful?"

"One of the finest sights in the world," cried

Tom enthusiastically, his wholesome face glowing from his exercise.

Just then they climbed an old stone wall and entered a forest known as "Upton Wood," which covered an area of ten miles or more in length and several miles across.

"It is beautiful," said Anne as she gazed up and down the wooded aisles carpeted in white. "It is like a great cathedral. I could almost kneel and pray at one of these snow covered stumps. They are like altars."

"The fault I find with the woods in winter," observed Grace, "is that there is nothing to do in them, no birds and beasts to make things lively, no flowers to pick, no brooks to wade in. Just an everlasting stillness."

"I admit there's not much social life," replied Tom. "The inhabitants either go to sleep or fly south, most of them. But don't forget the rabbits and squirrels and——"

"And an occasional bear," interrupted Reddy. "They have been seen in these parts."

"Worse than bears," said Hippy. "Wolves!"

"Goodness!" ejaculated Tom. "You are doing pretty well. I didn't know this country was so wild. But that's going some."

"Oh, well, as to that," said David, "nobody has ever really seen anything worse than wildcats, and we have to take old Jean's word for

it about the wolves. He claimed to have seen wolves in these woods three years ago. As a matter of fact they chased him out, and he was obliged to turn civilized for three months."

"Who is old Jean?" asked Tom, much interested.

"He is a French-Canadian hunter who has lived somewhere in this forest for years. He comes into town occasionally, looking like Daniel Boone, dressed in skins with a squirrel cap, and carrying a bunch of rabbits that he sells to the butchers."

"He's a great sight," said Grace. "I saw him on his snowshoes one day. He was coming down Upton Hill, where we coasted, you know, Anne, and he sped along the fields faster than David's motor cycle."

They had been walking for some time over the hard-packed snow and were now well into the forest, which hemmed them in on every side and seemed to stretch out in all directions into infinite space.

"Reddy, are you perfectly sure we won't get lost in this place?" demanded Jessica at last.

They had been walking along silently intent on their own thoughts. Perhaps it was the grandeur of the great snow-laden trees that oppressed them; perhaps the vast loneliness of

the place, where nothing was stirring, not even a rabbit.

"We're all right," returned Reddy. "My compass tells me. We go due north till we want to start home and then we can either turn around and go back due south or turn west and go home by the road."

"I have neither compass nor watch," said Hippy, "but nature's timepiece tells me that it's lunch time. This cold air gives me an appetite."

"Gives you one?" cried David. "You old anaconda, you were born with an appetite. You started eating boiled dumplings when you were two years old."

"Who told you so?" demanded Hippy.

"Never mind," said David. "It's an old story in Oakdale."

"Let's feed the poor soul," interposed Grace. "It would be wanton cruelty to keep him waiting any longer."

"He'll have to make the fire, then," said Reddy. "Make him pay for his dumplings if he wants 'em so early."

"All right, Carrots," cried Hippy. "I'll gather fagots and make a fire, just to keep you from talking so much."

"I'll help you, Hippy," said Nora. "I'm not ashamed to admit that I am very hungry

too. It's the people who are never able to eat at the table, and then go off and feed up in the pantry, who always manage to shirk their work."

The others all laughed.

"Let's make a fair division of labor," put in Grace, "so as to prevent future talk."

While some of them gathered sticks and dried branches, the others began clearing away the snow in an open space, where the fire could be built.

Anne and Jessica unpacked the luncheon and poured some coffee from a glass jar into a tin pot to be heated, while Tom peeled several long switches and impaled pieces of bacon on the ends to be cooked over the fire, which was soon blazing comfortably.

"How do you like this, girls?" he asked presently, when the broiling bacon began to give out an appetizing smell and the hot coffee added its fragrance to the air. "How's this for a winter picnic?"

"I like it better than a summer picnic," interposed Hippy. "The food is better and there are no gnats."

"Gnats are very fond of fat people," said Reddy. "They drink down their blood like—circus lemonade."

"Get busy and give me some coffee, Red-

head," said Hippy, who sat on a stump and ate energetically, while the others were broiling their slices of bacon.

"Here, Hippy," said Nora, pouring out a steaming cupful, "if it wasn't interesting to watch you store it away, perhaps I wouldn't wait on you hand and foot like this."

"This is the best way in the world to cook bacon," said Tom, holding his wand over the fire with several pieces of bacon stuck on the forked ends.

"A very good method, if your stick doesn't burn up," replied Anne. "There! Mine fell into the fire. I knew it would."

Meantime, Jessica and Grace were frying the rest of the slices in a pan.

"That's good enough, but this is better and quicker," said Grace. "There's no reason for dispensing with all the comforts of a home just because you choose to be a woodsman, Tom."

They never forget how they enjoyed that luncheon, devouring everything to the ultimate crumb and the final drop of hot coffee.

Although it was bitterly cold, they did not feel the chill. The brisk walk, the warm fire and their hearty meal had quickened their blood, and even Anne, the smallest and most delicate of them all, felt something of Tom's enthusiasm for the deep woods.

At last it was time to start again.

The boys were trampling down the fire while the girls began stowing the cups and coffee-pot into a basket. The woods seemed suddenly to have grown very quiet.

"How still it is," whispered Anne. "I feel as if everything in the world had stopped. There is not a breath stirring."

"Perhaps it has," answered Grace. "But we mustn't stop, even if everything else has, now that the fire is out, or we'll freeze to death."

She was just about to call the others briskly, for the air was beginning to nip her cheeks, when something in the faces of the four boys made her pause.

They were standing together near the remains of the fire, and seemed to be listening intently.

Not a sound, not even the crackling of a branch disturbed the stillness for a moment and then, from what appeared to be a great distance, came a long, howling wail, so forlorn, so weird, it might have been the cry of a spirit.

"What is it?" whispered the other girls, creeping about Grace.

"I think we'd better be hurrying along, now, girls," said David in a natural voice. "It's getting late."

"You can't deceive us, David," replied Grace calmly. "We know it's wolves."

CHAPTER XIX

WOLVES!

WOLVES! The name was terrifying enough. But their cry, that long-drawn-out, hungry call, gave the picnickers a chill of apprehension.

"We must take the nearest way out of the wood, Reddy," exclaimed Tom. "They are still several miles off, and, if we hurry, we may reach the open before they do."

All started on a run, David helping Anne to keep up with the others while Reddy looked after Jessica. Nora and Grace were well enough trained in outdoor exercise to run without any assistance from the boys. Indeed, Grace Harlowe could out-run most boys of her own age.

"Go straight to your left," called Reddy, consulting his compass as he hurried Jessica over the snow.

Again they heard the angry howl of the wolves, and the last time it seemed much nearer.

"It's a terrible business, this running after a heavy meal," muttered Hippy, gasping for breath as he stumbled along in the track of his friends. "I'll make a nice meal for 'em if they

catch me," he added, "and it looks as if I'd be the first to go."

"Reddy, are you sure you're right?" called Tom. "The woods don't seem to be thinning out as they are likely to do toward the edge."

"Keep going," called Reddy, confident of the direction. "You see, we had gone pretty far in, but I believe the open country is about a mile this way."

A mile? Good heavens! Jessica and Anne were already stumbling from exhaustion, while Hippy was quite winded. Another five minutes of this and at least three of the party would be food for wolves, unless something could be done. So thought David, who, breathless and light headed, was now almost carrying Anne.

"Hurrah!" cried Grace, who had been running ahead of the others. "Here's Jean's hut!"

There, sure enough, right in front of them, was a little house built of logs and mud.

Had it been put in that particular spot years ago just to save their eight lives now? Anne wondered vaguely as she blindly stumbled on.

As Grace lifted the wooden latch of the door, she looked over her shoulder. Not three hundred yards away loped five gaunt, gray animals. Their tongues hung limply from the sides of their mouths and their eyes glowered with a fierce hunger.

"Hurry!" she cried, in an agony of fear. "Oh, hurry!"

Tom and David were carrying Anne now, while Jessica was half staggering, assisted by Nora and Reddy. Hippy, the perspiration pouring from his face, brought up the rear, and they had scarcely pulled him in and barred the door before the wolves had reached the hut and were leaping against the walls howling and snarling.

Nobody spoke for some time. Those who were not too tired were busy thinking.

What was to be done? Eight young people, on a bitter cold winter afternoon, shut up in a hut in the middle of a forest while five half-starved wolves besieged the door.

Presently Tom Gray began to look about him.

There was a fireplace in the hut, which, by great good luck, contained the remains of a large backlog. More fuel was stacked in the corner, chiefly brushwood and sticks. He made a fire at once and the others gathered around the blaze, for they felt the penetrating chill now, after their rapid and exhausting flight through the forest.

"Here's a rifle," exclaimed Grace, who was also exploring, while Tom kindled the fire.

"Good!" cried Tom. "Let's see it. It may be our salvation."

He seized the gun and examined the barrel, but, alas, there was only one shot left in it. They searched the hut for more cartridges, but not one could they find.

In the meantime the wolves, which might have been taken for large collie dogs at a little distance, were trotting around the house, leaping against the door and windows and occasionally giving a blood-curdling howl.

"Suppose you feed me to them?" groaned Hippy. "You could get almost to Oakdale before they finished me."

The suggestion seemed to break the apprehensive silence that had settled down upon them, and they burst out laughing, one and all; even Anne, who was lying on a bearskin in front of the fire.

"I suppose the beasts were driven down from the hills by hunger, and when they smelled the fat bacon frying, the woods couldn't hold them," observed David. "I have always heard that a hungry wolf could smell something to eat on another planet."

"Well, what are we going to do?" demanded Nora. "If we leave this charming abode of Jean's, we shall be eaten alive, and if we stay in it we shall starve."

"You won't starve for a while yet, child. You have only just eaten. You remind me of

the story of the people who were locked up in a vault in a cemetery. They divided the candle into notches and decided to eat a notch apiece every day. They had just finished the last notch, and were expecting to die at any moment of starvation, when somebody unlocked the door, and how long do you suppose they had been shut up?"

"Several days, I suppose," answered Nora, "since they appeared to have eaten several notches."

"Not at all," replied David. "Only three hours."

"I'd rather be in a vault, with the dead, than out here," observed Hippy.

"Are we such poor company as all that, Fatty?" laughed Reddy.

"I've made a great find," announced Tom Gray in the midst of their chatter. He was standing on a bench examining something on a shelf suspended from the ceiling.

"What?" demanded the others in great excitement.

"A pair of snowshoes," he answered.

There was a disappointed silence.

"Well, don't all speak at once," said Tom at last. "Don't you agree with me that it's a great find?"

"We are sorry we can't enthuse," answered

David, "but we fail to see how snow shoes can help us out of our present predicament."

"Nobody here knows how to use them," continued Reddy, "and even if he did, he couldn't outrun a pack of wolves."

"I know how to use them," exclaimed Tom. "I learned it in Canada a few winters ago, but I will admit I couldn't beat the wolves in a race. However, the shoes may come in handy yet."

Just then one of the wolves threw his body against the door and the small cabin shook with the force of the blow.

"By Jove!" exclaimed David, "I thought they had us then. Another blow like that and the old latch might give way."

They looked about them for something to place against the door, but there was not a stick of furniture in the room. Even the bed, in one corner, was made of pine boughs and skins.

"I wonder how there happens to be only five wolves," said Anne. "I thought they went about in large packs."

"They are probably mama and papa and the whole family," replied Hippy. "The smallest, friskiest ones, I think, are young ladies, by the way they switched along behind the others and hung back kind of shy-like."

"Now, Hippy Wingate, don't tell us such a

romance as that," warned Grace, "when you were so winded you could hardly look in front of you, much less behind you."

At that moment there was another crash against the door while two gray paws and the tip of a pointed muzzle could be seen on one of the window sills.

"It's almost three o'clock," said Tom Gray, looking at his watch. "I think we'll have to do something, or we shall be penned here all night. Now, what shall it be? Suppose we have a friendly council and consider."

"All right," said David; "the meeting is open for suggestions. What do you advise, Anne?"

Anne smiled thoughtfully.

"I have no advice to offer," she said, "unless you shoot one of the wolves and let the others eat him up. Perhaps that would take the edge off their appetites."

"No, that would only serve as an appetizer," answered David. "After they had eaten one member of the family they would be still hungrier for another."

"And yet that isn't a half bad idea," said Tom, "and for two reasons. Did you notice a path which began at the hut and which was evidently Jean's trail? I saw it from the corner of my eye as I ran."

No, the others had not noticed anything of the sort. But who would stop to think of trails with a pack of hungry wolves at his heels?

Tom's training in the woods had taught him to take in such details, and consequently he had noticed it particularly. Moreover, the trail led straight to the left, presumably toward the west.

"Now, this is what I propose to do," he continued, taking down the snowshoes and looking over their straps and fastenings carefully. "Reddy, who, I hear, is a good shot, must climb up at one of the windows and shoot the first wolf he sees. Eating the dead wolf would probably occupy the attention of his brothers for some ten minutes or so—perhaps longer. While they are busy I shall make off on the snowshoes. With that much of a start, and with plenty of tasty human beings close at hand, I doubt if they even follow me. If they do, why I'll just shin up a tree. But I believe I can beat them. I'm pretty good on snowshoes."

"Tom Gray, you shan't do it!" cried Grace. "It may mean sure death. How do you know the wolves won't seize you the moment you open the door? Besides, you don't know the way. Suppose you should get lost?"

"No, no," insisted Tom. "None of these things will happen. I know positively that a

hungry wolf will stop chasing a human being and eat up a dead wolf, or a shoe, or a rug, or anything that happens to be thrown to him. I never was surer of anything in my life than that I can get away from here before the beasts know it."

There was a storm of protestation from the others, but Tom Gray finally overruled every objection and they reluctantly consented to let him go.

It was arranged that Reddy should stand on a bench by one of the small windows and attract the attention of the wolves by throwing out a rabbit skin that was nailed to one of the walls. While the beasts were tearing this to pieces he was to shoot one of them. Furthermore, the instant the live wolves had finished devouring the dead one, Reddy was to pitch out another skin, of which there were many about the hut, of foxes, rabbits and other small animals, which the trapper had collected.

This, they agreed, would probably keep the wolves occupied for awhile, until Tom had got a good start down the trail.

Tom slipped his feet in the snowshoes and stood by the door waiting. While the wolves howled and fought over the rabbit skin, bang went the rifle.

"I got him!" cried Reddy.

In an instant Tom Gray had flung open the door and was off down the trail.

As he had expected, the live wolves were hungrily eating the dead one and had not apparently even noticed his departure.

The boys and girls in the hut sat breathlessly waiting, while Reddy watched the famished animals gorge themselves with the blood and fresh meat of their comrade.

Reddy had rolled up a fox skin into a small bundle, and was prepared to pitch it out to them the moment they had finished.

Just as they had lapped the last drop of blood, he cast out the skin. They sniffed at it a moment, gave a long, disapproving howl, that sent the cold chills down the spines of the prisoners, and then made off down the trail after Tom Gray.

Reddy gave a loud exclamation and jumped down from the bench.

"*They have followed Tom!*" he cried, in a high state of excitement.

There was a long pause.

"We'll have to go, then," said David finally. "Girls, you are safe as long as you stay inside the hut, and some of us at least will be able to bring help before long."

With that, all three of the boys, for Hippy was no coward, in spite of his size and appetite,

rushed out of the hut and disappeared in the wood.

The afternoon shadows were beginning to lengthen when Grace fastened the latch and returned to the fire where her three friends sat silent, afraid to speak for fear of giving way to tears.

CHAPTER XX

THE GRAY BROTHERS

THE four girls never knew how long they waited that afternoon in the hunter's cabin. It might have been only minutes, but the minutes seemed to drag themselves into hours. The uncertain fate of the boys, the tragedy that surely awaited perhaps all of them made the situation almost unbearable.

Grace piled the fireplace high with the remaining wood, but the blaze could not keep away the chill that crept over them as the sun sank behind the trees. They shivered and drew nearer together for comfort.

Should they ever see their four brave friends again?

And David?

Anne could endure it no longer. She rose and began to move about the hut. There lay her

coat and hat. Almost without knowing what she did she put them on, pulled on her mittens and tied a broad, knitted muffler around her ears.

"Girls," she said suddenly. She had gone about her preparations so quietly the other three had not even turned to see what she was doing. "I'm going. I don't want any of you to go with me, but I would rather die than stay here all night without knowing what has happened to David and the others."

"Wait a moment," cried Grace, "and I'll go, too. It would be unbearable not to know—and if we meet the wolves, why, then, as Tom said, we can climb a tree. Poor Tom!" she added sadly. "I wonder where he is now."

Nora and Jessica rose hastily.

"Do you think I'd stay?" cried Nora. "Not in a thousand years!"

"Anything is better than this," exclaimed Jessica, as she drew on her wraps and prepared to follow her friends into the woods.

Grace opened the door, peering out into the gathering darkness.

"There is not a living thing in sight," she said. "We'd better hurry, girls; it will soon be dark." Then the four young girls started down the trail and were soon out of sight.

When Tom Gray left old Jean's hut, with

nothing between him and the ravenous wolves, except the angle of a wall, he took a long, gliding step, his body swinging gracefully with the motion, and was off like the wind, under a broad avenue of trees. But he had not gone far before one of the straps loosened and his foot slipped. He fell headlong, but was up instantly.

It took a few moments to tighten the strap, and it must have been then that the wolves caught the scent, and after hurriedly finishing the meal in hand, galloped off for another without taking the slightest notice of the fox skin that Reddy had tossed to them. Tom made a fresh start, feeling more confident on his feet than he had at first, and he was well under way when he heard the howl of the wolves behind him. Gathering all his energies together he managed to keep ahead of them until the woods became less dense, and he saw through the interlacing branches the open meadows and fields.

"They are too hungry to leave off now," he said to himself as he hurriedly searched the valley below for the nearest farmhouse. In front of him was a very high, steep hill, that same hill, in fact, where Nora's coasting party had taken place. Glancing behind him, he caught a glimpse of the gray brothers trotting through the forest.

"I'll take the hill," he thought. "It's quick-

est and there must be some kind of a refuge below." With long, swift glides he reached the knob which had hidden Miriam's sled from view as she bore down on Anne the night of the coasting party.

The wolves were right behind him now, and unless something turned up he hardly dared think what would happen.

But Tom Gray had always possessed an indomitable belief that things would turn out all right. It seemed absurd to him that he was to be food for wolves when he had still a long and delightful life before him. Certainly he would not give up without a struggle.

Perhaps it was this fine confidence that his destiny was not yet completed that gave him the strength which now promised to save him. As he fled down the hill he saw below an old oak tree whose first branches had been lopped off. Exerting every atom of strength in him, just as he reached the bottom Tom gave a leap. He caught the lowest limb with one hand, pulled himself up and calmly took his seat in the crotch of the tree.

He was just in time. The wolves were at his heels, snarling and snapping like angry dogs. The boy regarded them from his safe perch and burst out laughing.

"So I fooled you, did I, you gray rascals?"

he said aloud. "You think you'll keep me here all night, do you, old hounds? Well, we'll see who wins out in the long run."

Meanwhile, the wolves ran about howling disconsolately while Tom sat in the branches of the tree, rubbing his hands and arms to keep warm. He had removed the snowshoes and was just contemplating climbing to the top of the tree to keep his blood circulating, when three figures appeared on the brow of the hill.

"As I live, it's the boys," he said to himself. "Go back!" he yelled, waving a red silk muffler. "Climb a tree quickly!"

They had seen and heard him, and making for the nearest tree, each shinned up as fast as he could.

"Here's a howdy-do," said Tom to himself. "Four boys treed by wolves and night coming on."

Yet he swung his legs and whistled thoughtfully, while the others shouted to him, but he could not hear what they said, for the wind was blowing away from him. In the meantime the wolves did not all desert him and he could only wait patiently, with the others, for something to turn up.

What did turn up was a good deal of a shock to all of them.

Grace, Jessica, Nora and Anne suddenly

Tom Gray Escapes from the Wolves.

emerged from the forest, standing out in bold relief on the brow of the hill.

The three boys at the top of the hill all jumped to the ground at once.

"Run for the trees," cried David, for the wolves had caught the new scent and had started toward them on a dead run.

"Crack, crack," went a rifle. Instantly the first wolf staggered and fell backward.

How was it that the boys had not noticed before that the girls were not alone?

Another shot and a second wolf ran almost into their midst, gave a leap and fell dead. One more dropped; and the sole surviving wolf beat a frenzied retreat.

"We found old Jean!" cried Grace. "Wasn't it the most fortunate thing in the world? And now nobody is killed and we are all safe and I'm so happy!" She gave the old hunter's arm a squeeze.

Old Jean, enveloped in skins from top to toe, smiled good-naturedly.

"It was the Bon Dieu, mademoiselle, who have preserve you. Do not t'ank ole Jean. It was the Bon Dieu who put it in ole Jean's haid to set rabbit trap to-night."

He would accept neither money nor thanks for shooting the wolves.

"I will skin them. It is sufficient."

It was not long before eight very tired and very happy young people were seated around Mrs. Gray's dinner table. Grace was a little choky and homesick for her mother, now that all the danger was over, but the week of the house party was almost up, so she concealed her impatience to be home again.

The softly shaded candles shed a warm glow over their faces, and the logs crackled on the brass andirons. They looked into each others' eyes and smiled sleepily.

Had it all been a dream, their winter picnic, or was old Jean at that very moment really nailing wolf skins to his wall?

CHAPTER XXI

THE LOST LETTER

SPRING was well advanced, full of soft airs and the sweet scents of orchards in full bloom.

Through the open windows of the schoolroom Grace could hear the pleasant sounds of the out of doors. The tinkle of a cow bell in a distant meadow and the songs of the birds brought to her the nearness of the glorious summer time.

She chewed the end of her pencil impatiently, endeavoring to withdraw her attention from the

things she liked so much better than Latin grammar and algebra. Examinations were coming, those bugbears of the young freshman, and then vacation. A vision of picnics crossed her mind, of long days spent out of doors, with luncheon under the trees and tramps through the woods. Yet, before all these joys, must come the inevitable final test, the race for the freshman prize. Although, after all, only two would really enter the race, Miriam and Anne. Nobody else would think of competing with these two brilliant students.

How tired Anne looked! She had done nothing but study of late. No party had been alluring enough to beguile her from her books. She had even discontinued her work with Mrs. Gray, and early and late toiled at her studies.

"She will tire herself out," Grace thought, and made a resolution to take Anne with her on a visit to her grandmother's in the country just as soon as the High School doors were closed for the summer.

Miriam was not studying so hard. But then she never did anything hard. She simply seemed to absorb, without taking the trouble to plod. She had been very defiant of late, Grace thought, and more insolent than ever before. She and Miss Leece were "thicker" than was good for Miriam, considering that teacher's pe-

culiar disposition to flatter and spoil her. However, that was none of Grace's business, and certainly Miss Leece had been careful since the sound rating Miss Thompson had given her.

Just then the gong broke in upon Grace's reflections. With a sigh of relief she closed her book and strolled with her friends down to their usual meeting place in the locker room.

There was but one topic of conversation now, the freshman prize.

"Anne," predicted Nora, "you just can't help winning it! I don't believe it's in you to make a mistake. Miss Leece always gives you the hardest problems, too, but she can't stump little Anne."

Anne smiled wearily. It was well examinations were to begin in two days. In her secret soul she felt she could not hold out much longer. Moreover, Anne was worried about family affairs. She had received a letter, that morning, which had troubled her so much that she had been on the point, a dozen times, of bursting into tears. However, if she won the prize—not the small one, but the *big* one—the difficulty would be surmounted.

Another worry had crept into her mind. She had lost the letter. A little, wayward breeze had seized it suddenly from her limp fingers and blown it away. She knew the letter was lurking

somewhere in a corner of the schoolroom, and she had hoped to find it when the class was dismissed. But the missing paper was nowhere in sight when she had searched for it during recess. Perhaps it had blown out the window, in which case it would be brushed up by the janitress and never thought of again. Not for worlds would Anne have had anyone read that letter.

It was during the afternoon session, in the middle of one of the schoolroom recitations, that she caught sight of her letter again. But after the class was dismissed and she had made haste to the corner of the room, where she thought she had seen it under a desk, it was not there. Disappointed and uneasy Anne put on her hat and started home.

All afternoon she worried about it. Perhaps it was because she was so tired that she was especially sensitive about the letter being found by some one else. If that some one else should read the contents, she felt it would mean nothing less than disgrace.

"You look exhausted, child," said Anne's sister Mary, who was weary herself, having worked hard all day on a pile of spring sewing Mrs. Gray had ordered. "Why don't you take a walk and not try to do any studying this afternoon?"

"I think I will, sister," replied Anne; and, pinning on her hat, she left her small cottage and started toward High School Street.

Turning mechanically into the broad avenue shaded by elm trees, she strolled along, half-dreaming and half-waking. She was so weary she felt she might lie down and sleep for twenty years, and like Rip Van Winkle awaken old and gray. It was foolish of her to be so uneasy about that letter.

Was it a premonition that compelled her to return to the schoolroom and search again for it? Perhaps the old janitress might have found it. The young girl quickened her pace. She must hurry if she wanted to catch the old woman before the latter closed up for the night.

Anne had not thought of looking behind. Her mind, so trained to concentration, was now bent only upon one object. But would it have swerved her from her present purpose, even if she had noticed Miss Leece following her?

The High School was still open, although Anne could not find the janitress. Perhaps the old woman was asleep somewhere. On several occasions she had been found sleeping soundly when she should have been brushing out schoolrooms and mopping floors. Anne was determined, however, to give one good, thorough search for her letter and she accordingly

mounted to the floor where the freshmen class room was situated and entered the large, empty recitation room.

She looked long and carefully under the desks and benches, even going through the scrap baskets, but there was no sign of the letter. Then she went into some of the other class rooms, but her search was unrewarded.

"What's the use?" she asked herself at last. "It's sure to have been destroyed. I think I'll just have to give it up, and try to rest a little before to-morrow, or I'll never be fit to try for that prize."

As she started down the broad staircase she heard the rasping voice of Miss Leece mingling with the principal's cool, well-modulated tones. Anne paused a moment, watching the two figures below. Miss Leece looked up and caught her eye, but Miss Thompson was engaged in unlocking the door, and did not see the little figure lingering on the steps.

Just as the door opened, another door slammed violently, and the next moment Anne heard footsteps running along a small passage that crossed the corridor. Leaning far over the rail she caught a glimpse of a figure. It was—no, Anne could not be certain of the identity. But it looked like—well, never mind whom. Anne meant to keep the secret, for it was evident

that the person had been bent on mischief, else why slam a door and run at the approach of Miss Thompson? And now Anne heard the door open again and Miss Thompson's voice calling: "Who is there?" But there was no answer. Deep down in Anne's heart there crept a vague suspicion.

CHAPTER XXII

DANGER AHEAD

MY DEAR GRACE:

Will you come and see me at my office after school today? I have something very important to discuss.

Sincerely yours,

EMMA THOMPSON.

GRACE read the letter over twice. What in the world could Miss Thompson want to discuss with her? Perhaps she had not been doing well enough in her classes. But Grace rejected the idea. She always kept up to the average, and it was only those who fell below who ever received warnings from the principal.

Perhaps it was——well, never mind, she would wait and see. As soon as school was over she hurried to the principal's office and tapped on the door.

"Well, Grace, my dear," said Miss Thompson, as the young girl entered, "did my note frighten you?"

"No, indeed," replied Grace; "I had a clear conscience and I don't expect to fail in exams. to-morrow, although I am not so studious as Anne Pierson or Miriam."

"Of course you don't expect to fail, my dear," said the principal, kindly, for, of all the girls in the school, Grace was her favorite. "I didn't bring you here to scold you. But I have something very serious to talk about. While I have threshed out the matter with myself, I believe I might do better by talking things over with one of my safest and sanest freshman."

"Why, what has happened, Miss Thompson?" asked Grace curiously.

"First, let me ask you a few questions," answered the principal. "Tell me something about the competition for the freshman prize. Which girl do you think has the best chance of winning it?"

"I know whom I want to win," replied Grace innocently. "Anne, of course, and I believe she will, too. While Miriam is more showy in her recitations, Anne is much more thorough, and she studies a great deal harder. The fact is, I am afraid she is making herself ill with studying. But she is determined to win not the lit-

tle prize, but the big one, which is more than even Anne can do, I believe. Whoever heard of having every examination paper perfect?"

"It has not been done so far," admitted Miss Thompson, "but why is Anne so bent on winning the prize? Is it all for glory, do you think?"

"Anne is very poor, you know, Miss Thompson," said Grace simply.

"So she is," replied the principal, "and the child needs the money." Miss Thompson paused a moment, looking thoughtfully out over the smooth green lawn. "Grace," she resumed, finally, "I have something very serious to tell you. Two days ago I made a discovery that may change the fate of the freshman prize this year considerably. You know I keep the examination questions here in my desk. That is, the originals. A copy is now at the printers. So, you see, I have only one set of originals. I had occasion to come back to my office quite late the day of the discovery, and, as I let myself in at that door," she pointed to the door leading into the corridor, "what I thought was a gust of wind slammed the door leading into the next room which I usually keep shut and bolted on this side. My desk was open and the freshman examination papers undoubtedly had been tampered with. I could tell because they are usually the last in the pile and they were all on top

and quite disarranged. Whoever had been here, had heard my key in the lock, and without waiting to close the desk had fled by the other door. I feel deeply grieved over this matter. I should never think of suspecting any of my fine girls of such trickery; and, yet, who else could it have been except one of the freshmen?"

"Oh, Miss Thompson, this is dreadful," exclaimed Grace, distressed and shocked over the story. "I don't believe there's a girl in the class who would have done it. There must be some mistake."

'That is why I sent for you, Grace," said the principal. "I want your advice. Now Anne——"

"*Anne?*" interrupted Grace horrified. "You don't suppose, for a minute, Anne would be dishonest? Never! I won't stay and listen any longer," and she rushed to the door.

Miss Thompson followed, placing a detaining hand on her arm.

"You are right, Grace, to be loyal to your friend," said the principal, always just and kind under the most trying circumstances; "but Anne, I must tell you, is under suspicion."

"Why?" demanded Grace, almost sobbing in her anger and unhappiness.

"The afternoon of the discovery Anne was

here long after school hours. She was seen by two people wandering about the building."

"Who were the people?" demanded Grace incredulously.

"The janitress, who saw her from the window of another room, and—Miss Leece."

"I thought so," exclaimed Grace, with a note of triumph in her voice. "It is Miss Leece, is it, who is trumping up all this business? I tell you, I don't believe a word of it, Miss Thompson. Anne would no more do such a thing than I would, and I am going to fight to save her if it takes my last breath. Do you know how hard she has worked to win this prize? Simply all the time. I believe, if she knew what you suspected, it would kill her. I believe it's some tale Miss Leece has made up. And besides, why shouldn't she have come back to the building? Perhaps she forgot a book or something. I'd just like to know what Miss Leece was doing here at that time of day."

"She came here to meet me on business," answered Miss Thompson. "That is why she knows something of the unfortunate affair. She was with me when I found my desk had been broken open and the papers disturbed. She also heard the other door slam and it was then she told me of having seen Anne wandering about the building for which, as you say, there might

have been a dozen reasons; I believe, as firmly as you do, that the child is incapable of cheating, and I intend to leave no stone unturned to get at the truth. But there is still another fact against Anne that is very black." The speaker took from a drawer a slip of folded paper. "This was found in the building," she continued, "and since it was an open letter, without address and under the circumstances, so important, it was read and the contents reported to me. I have since read it myself and I now ask you to read it."

DEAR ANNE:

I must have one hundred dollars at once, or go somewhere for a long time. I foolishly signed a friend's name to a slip of paper. I didn't know he would be so hard, but he threatens to prosecute unless I pay up before the end of next week. I know you have rich friends. I have been hearing of your successes. Perhaps the old lady, Mrs. G., will oblige you. I trust to your good sense to see that the hundred must be forthcoming, or it will mean disgrace for us all.

Your father,

J. P.

Grace limply held the letter in one hand.

"Oh, poor, poor Anne!" she groaned, wiping away the tears that had welled up into her eyes and were running down her cheeks.

"I feel just as you do, my child," went on

Miss Thompson. "I am deeply, bitterly sorry for this unfortunate child. But you will agree with me that she has had a very strong motive for winning the prize."

Grace nodded mutely.

"By the way," she asked presently, when she had calmed herself, "who was it that found the letter?"

"Miss Leece again," replied Miss Thompson, hesitatingly.

"There, you see," exclaimed Grace excitedly, "that woman is determined to ruin Anne before the close of school. I tell you, I won't believe Anne is guilty. It has taken just this much to make me certain that she is entirely innocent. Is there no clue whatever to the person who copied the papers?"

"Yes," answered Miss Thompson, "there is. This had been shoved back in the desk under the papers. It does not belong to me, and it could not have gotten into my desk by any other means. I suppose, in her hurry to copy the freshmen sheets, whoever she was, laid it down and forgot it."

Miss Thompson produced a crumpled pocket handkerchief. Grace took it and held it to the light. There were no marks or initials upon it whatever; it was simply a cambric handkerchief with a narrow hemstitched border, a handker-

chief such as anyone might use. It was neither large nor small, neither of thin nor thick material.

"There's nothing on it," said Grace. "I suppose the stores sell hundreds of these."

"That's very true," answered the principal, "but I hoped you would be familiar enough with your friends' handkerchiefs to recognize this one."

"No," replied Grace, "I haven't the least idea whose it is. Wait a moment," she added quickly, smelling the handkerchief; "there is a perfume on it of some sort. Did you notice that?"

"I did," replied Miss Thompson. "It was one of the first things I did notice. I am very sensitive to perfumes; perhaps because I dislike them on clothing. But I waited for you to find it out for yourself. In fact, my dear, this will be the only means of trapping the person. Now, what perfume is it, and who in the class uses it? I am not familiar with perfumes, but I thought perhaps you were. And now, I will tell you that this is the reason I sent for you. The reason I showed you this letter, which has only been seen by one other person besides myself—Miss Leece, of course. I do not wish to tell anyone else about this matter. I do not care to put the subject before the School Board

for discussion. I do not believe, any more than you, that Anne is guilty and I have taken you into my confidence because I believe you are the one person in the world who can help me in this predicament. Miss Leece, of course, intends to do everything in her power to bring the child 'to justice.' But, until I give her permission, she will hardly dare to speak of it. So far, we three are the only people who know what has happened. In the meantime, I shall turn over this handkerchief to you. Keep it carefully and be very guarded about what you do and say. You are a young girl," she continued, taking Grace's hand and gazing full into her honest eyes, "but I have a great respect for your judgment and discretion, and that is the reason I am asking for your help in this very delicate matter. You may rest assured that I shall do nothing whatever; at least, not until after examinations. I have an idea that we may get a clue through them. We must save Anne, whose life would be utterly ruined by such a false accusation as this. And I feel convinced that it is false."

"Well, I can tell you one thing, Miss Thompson," returned Grace as she opened the door, "and that is Anne Pierson never used any perfume in her life. She hasn't any to use."

Miss Thompson nodded and smiled.

"I was sure of that," she called.

Grace had little time to lose. The examinations, which took place the next day and the day after, would undoubtedly bring matters to a crisis.

She took the handkerchief from her pocket and sniffed at it. Neither was she familiar with perfumes, and this odor was new to her. Suddenly an idea occurred to her and she made straight for the nearest drugstore.

"Mr. Gleason," she demanded of the clerk in charge, "could you tell me what perfume this is?"

The druggist sniffed thoughtfully at the handkerchief for some seconds.

"It's sandalwood," he said at last. "We received some in stock a week ago."

CHAPTER XXIII

IN THE THICK OF THE FIGHT

HOW examinations loom up on the fatal day, like monstrous obstacles that must be overcome! How the hours slip past, with nothing to break the stillness save the scratching of pens on foolscap paper, while each student draws upon the supply of knowledge stored up during the winter months!

A fly buzzes on the window pane; a teacher rises, tiptoes slowly about the room and sits down again. She can do nothing, now, but keep watch on the pairs of drooping shoulders and the tired, flushed faces.

Anne was so absorbed in her work that she was oblivious to everything about her. Her pen moved with precision over her paper and her copy was neat and clear.

It was the second day of the examinations and she felt that her fate would soon be decided; but she was too tired now to worry. She worked on quietly and steadily. She had almost finished, and, as she answered one question after another, she was more and more buoyed up by the conviction that she would win the prize.

Miriam had finished her work. Her impatient nature would not permit her to do anything slowly. As she gave a last flourishing stroke with her pen, she leaned back, looking about her. She smiled contemptuously as her eyes rested on Anne.

"What a shabby, slow little creature she is!" Miriam murmured. "It would be a disgrace for a girl like me to be beaten by her. I'll never endure it in the world."

It was not long before the girls had all finished and turned in their papers to the teacher in charge.

"Oh, glorious happy day!" cried Nora, as she sped joyously down the corridor. "Examinations are over, and now for a good time!"

A dozen or more of the freshman class had been invited to Miriam's to a tea to celebrate the close of school. Anne, of course, was not invited; but Grace and her friends had received invitations and promptly accepted them.

Grace had taken Nora and Jessica into her confidence to some extent. She needed their help, but she had not mentioned the letter from Anne's father. The three girls met early by appointment, at the Harlowe house, to discuss matters before going to Miriam Nesbit's.

"Here's a list of the people in Oakdale," said Nora, "who have bought sandalwood perfume. I have been to four drug stores and all the dry goods stores."

Grace took the list and read:

" 'Mrs. I. Rosenfield, Miss Alice Gwendolyn Jones, Mr. Percival Butz, etc.' Good heavens!" she cried, "there's not a single person on this list who has anything to do with Oakdale High School. Mr. Percival Butz," she laughed. "The idea of a man buying perfume. Really, girls," she added in despair, "we've been wasting our time. I can't see that any of us has made the least headway. I have called on almost every freshman in the class and inquired

what her favorite perfume is, and I know some of them thought I was silly. Anyway, not one of them claimed to use sandalwood."

"The stupidest girls would be the ones who would be most likely to want to copy the papers," observed Jessica, "but those girls are much too nice to believe such horrid things about. I went to see Ellen Wiggins and Sallie Moore yesterday afternoon. Neither of them use perfume. Sallie Moore told me she had an orris root sachet that had almost lost its scent. Which reminds me," she continued, "why couldn't this handkerchief have been scented by some other means than just perfume. Perhaps it was put into a mouchoir case with sandalwood powder."

"Why, of course," exclaimed Grace. "Jessica, I never thought of asking who had been buying sachet powders. You have a great head."

"Must I go back and ask all those storekeepers for more lists?" demanded Nora.

"No, child," replied Grace. "Just give us time to think first."

"It's time to go to Miriam's anyhow," observed Jessica. "Perhaps some sort of inspiration will come on the way," and the three girls set out for the tea party.

As they paused to admire the beautiful flower beds on the Nesbit lawn Jessica said:

"Have you inquired Miriam's favorite perfume?"

"Oh, yes," answered Grace. "She said she liked them all and had no favorites."

"Why are all these strange young women breaking into my premises?" demanded a voice behind them.

"David Nesbit," cried Grace, "where have you been all this time? You never seem to find the time to come near your old friends any more."

"I have been busy, girls," replied David. "Never busier in my life. But I believe I've struck it at last. It will not be long, now, before I turn into a bird."

"Oh, *do* show it to us!" cried Grace. "Where is the model?"

"In my workroom," he replied. "If you are very good, and will promise to say nothing to the others, I'll give you a peep this afternoon. When I signal to you from the music room, by sounding three bass notes on the piano, start upstairs and I'll meet you on the landing. You may ask why this mystery? But I know girls, and if all those chattering freshmen are allowed to come into my room they are sure to knock over some of the models, or break something, and I couldn't stand it."

The three girls entered the large and imposing

drawing room where Miriam, in a beautiful pink mulle, trimmed with filmy lace insertions, received them with unusual cordiality; and presently they all repaired to the dining room where ice cream and strawberries were served with little cakes with pink icing. It was, as a matter of fact, a pink tea, and Miriam's cheeks were as pink as her decorations. She looked particularly excited and happy. Each of the three chums had just swallowed her last and largest strawberry, saved as a final relish, when three low notes sounded softly on the piano in the adjoining room.

In the hum of conversation nobody had noticed David's signal except Grace and her friends, who strolled into the music room where he was waiting.

"Come along," he said, leading the way up the back stairs, "and please consider this as a special mark of attention from the great inventor who has never yet made anything go. Where's Anne?"

"I suppose she is resting," answered Grace. "She had just about reached the end of her strength to-day."

"But she'll win the prize, I hope," continued David.

"We are all sure of it," answered Grace, in emphatic tones.

David opened the door into his own private quarters, which consisted of a large workroom with a laboratory attached, where he had once worked on chemical experiments until he had become interested in flying machines.

"Here they are," he exclaimed, walking over to a large table in the workroom. "I have three models, you see, and each one works a little better than the other. This last one, I believe, will do the business." He pointed to a graceful little aeroplane made of bamboo sticks and rice paper.

"Isn't it sweet?" exclaimed the girls in unison.

"And it has a name, too," continued David unabashed. "I've called her 'Anne,' because, while she's such a small, unpretentious-looking little craft, she can soar to such heights. There is not room here to show you how good she is, but we'll have another gymnasium seance some day soon, Anne must come and see her namesake."

"There!" cried Grace in a tone of annoyance. "I have jagged a big place in my dress, David Nesbit, on a nail in your table. Why do you have such things about to destroy people's clothes?"

"But nobody who wears dresses ever comes in here," protested David, "except mother and

the maid, and they know better than to come near this table. Can't I do something? Glue it together or mend it with a piece of sticking plaster?"

"No, indeed," answered the girl. "Just get me a needle and thread, please. I don't want to go downstairs with such a hideous rent in my dress."

"Why, of course," assented David. "Why didn't I think of it sooner? Mother will fix you up," and he opened the door into the hall and called "mother!"

Mrs. Nesbit came hurrying in. She never waited to be called twice by her son, who was the apple of her eye.

"My dear Grace," she exclaimed when she saw the tear, "this is too bad. Come right into my room and I'll mend it for you."

So it happened that Grace was presently seated in an armchair in Mrs. Nesbit's bedroom, while the good-natured woman whipped together the jagged edges of the rent.

"What a beautiful box you have, Mrs. Nesbit," said Grace, pointing to a large carved box on the dressing table.

"Do you like it?" replied the other. "I'm fond of it, probably because I was so happy when I bought it years ago while traveling abroad with my husband. It smells as sweet

as it did when it was new," she added, placing the box in Grace's lap.

Nora and Jessica, who had been hovering about the room, now came over to see the sweet-scented box. How strangely familiar was that pungent perfume which floated up to them. Where had they smelled it before?

"It is made of carved sandalwood," continued Mrs. Nesbit, opening the lid," and I have always kept my handkerchiefs in it, you see——"

"Mother!" called David's voice from the hall, and Mrs. Nesbit left the room for a moment.

"Sandalwood!" gasped Grace.

Yes, it was the same perfume that now faintly scented the famous handkerchief.

There was a pile of handkerchiefs in the box. Grace lifted the top one and sniffed at it. She examined the border carefully and the texture.

"It looks like stealing," she whispered, "but I must have this handkerchief. I'll return it afterwards," and she slipped the handkerchief into her belt.

Nora and Jessica had exchanged significant glances, while Nora's lips had formed the words, "exactly like the other one."

In the meantime Miss Thompson had been closeted with Anne Pierson for half an hour in the principal's office. By special request she

had arranged to have Anne's examination papers looked over immediately and sent to her. The papers were therefore the first to receive attention from each teacher, and were then turned over to Miss Thompson, who hurried with them into her office and locked the door behind her.

"It would be a pity if they were too perfect," she said to herself. "That would tell very much against Anne, I fear."

But, as her eyes ran over them, she shook her head dubiously. They were marvels of neatness and not one cross or written comment marred their perfection. At the foot of each sheet the word "perfect" had been written. Some of the teachers had even added notes stating that no errors of any sort had been found, while one professor had paid Anne the very high compliment of stating that the perfection of her examination papers had not been a surprise. Never in that teacher's experience had he taught a more brilliant pupil. Miss Thompson looked with interest at the algebra papers. If this had not come up, she thought, Miss Leece would certainly have managed to find a flaw somewhere, even if she had had to invent one. But under the circumstances, it was more to that wily woman's purpose to give Anne her due. For Miss Leece knew that

a perfect examination paper would tell more against the young girl than for her.

It was after this that Miss Thompson had her talk with Anne, a very kindly, interested talk, in which the young girl's prospects, her work and health had all come under consideration. And then in the gentlest possible way Miss Thompson had produced the letter.

"Is this yours, Anne?" she asked.

Anne started violently.

"O Miss Thompson," she cried, making a great effort to keep back her tears, "where did you find it? I spent one entire afternoon here looking for it. It was the very day you and Miss Leece were here."

"Oh, you saw us then," replied the principal. "And where were you?"

"I was outside on the steps," replied Anne. "Didn't Miss Leece mention it? She looked up and saw me just as you unlocked the door. Then the other door slammed and some one hurried down the passage. I saw her, too, but——"

"But what, Anne?" asked the principal slowly.

"But I am not sure who it was."

"Have you an idea?"

"I could only guess from the outline of her figure," replied Anne. "And it wouldn't be

fair to tell her name unless I had seen her plainly. It might have been some one else."

Anne had a suspicion that something had happened, and that Miss Thompson had brought her here to find out what she knew. But she never dreamed that she herself was under suspicion.

One thing had struck Miss Thompson very forcibly. Miss Leece had known all along that Anne was on the staircase at the very moment the other person was slamming the door in their faces. And yet Miss Leece was determined to condemn Anne to the faculty that very night. She had said so in as many words, in defiance of the principal's arguments against such a course.

"Well, good night, my child," she said at last, giving Anne a motherly kiss. "You have done a good winter's work and I am proud of you."

Anne hurried away, clutching the letter in her hand. She wondered if Miss Thompson had read it, and somehow she didn't mind so much after all. The principal seemed to her the very embodiment of all that was good and kind.

Miss Thompson was destined to have several callers that afternoon. In a few moments Grace hurried in, breathless and excited.

"Look at that, Miss Thompson," cried the

girl, thrusting a handkerchief into her hand. "Look at it and smell it."

"Well," replied the principal, "I've seen it before and smelled it before, too. Only you've had it washed and ironed, haven't you?"

Grace took a crumpled handkerchief from her pocket.

"Here's the real one," she cried triumphantly.

The two handkerchiefs were certainly identical in shape and material and both were perfumed with sandalwood.

"Where did you get this one?" demanded the principal.

"From Mrs. Nesbit's sandalwood handkerchief box," whispered Grace slowly.

"You think it was then——?"

"Yes," replied Grace. "I'm certain of it. It's as plain as daylight. She borrowed her mother's handkerchief."

"Dear, dear!" exclaimed the principal. "How very foolish! How very unnecessary! And all because she couldn't endure to be beaten! Do you know," she continued presently, "that Miss Leece intends to denounce Anne before the faculty to-night? My authority can't stop her, and I don't believe the similarity of these two handkerchiefs will either."

"Miss Thompson," exclaimed Grace, "I tell you I know perfectly well that woman is going

to try to ruin Anne for the sake of Miriam. I have known it for months. Why, at Mrs. Gray's Christmas party she did a thing that is too outrageous to believe," and here Grace opened a bundle she had brought with her and produced the marionette of James Pierson.

Miss Thompson was shocked at the recital of the story. She, too, recognized the green silk tie, although she had no recollection of Miriam's red velveteen suit, a piece of which formed the waistcoat. But there was something about that green silk which stuck in the memory. Probably because it was so ugly, having a semi-invisible yellow line running through it.

"Yes," she said, "I remember it very well. It was the trimming on a blouse Miss Leece wore last autumn. I do not believe anyone could forget such a hideous piece of material."

Miss Thompson paused a moment and considered.

"My dear," she continued presently, "I believe this is all I shall need to confront Miss Leece with. Your bringing it to me at this moment shows most excellent judgment. It may prevent a painful scandal in the school, as well as saving Anne from disgrace. As for the two handkerchiefs, the evidence is too slight to make any open accusations; but at any rate you may leave both with me. I may need them

in my interview with Miss Leece. I may as well tell you I am anticipating a pretty stiff battle with her. I don't believe I should have won with only the handkerchiefs."

"Oh, I hope we can save Anne, Miss Thompson," cried Grace.

"I earnestly hope so, too," replied the principal. "It would be too heart breaking to have the child go down under this false accusation; and aside from that, such scandals are bad for the school and I would rather deal with them privately than have them made public. But run along now, dear. You have done nobly and deserve a prize yourself."

A knock was heard, and as Grace departed through one door Miss Leece opened the other.

"If Miss Thompson only wins this battle!" the young girl exclaimed to herself. "I want to believe she will, but I know that terrible Miss Leece will make a tremendous fight."

She joined her friends, who were waiting for her outside.

"Girls," she cried, "pray for Anne to-night!"

Nora, good little Catholic that she was, went straight to her church and burned two candles before the altar of the Holy Virgin, while she offered up a humble petition for Anne's deliverance; while Grace and Jessica, in their own bedrooms, that night prayed reverently and

earnestly that Anne might be saved from her enemies. Thus were Anne's three devoted friends working and praying for her while she slept the sleep of exhaustion.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FRESHMAN PRIZE

GRADUATION night in Oakdale High School was one of the great social events of the year. The floor and galleries of Assembly Hall were invariably packed with an enthusiastic audience; for the two schools united at the ceremony of graduation and the senior class formed a mixed company on the stage.

Most of the pupils attended commencement and the freshman class of the Girls' High School was always there in full to witness the triumph of one of its members, who was called forth from the audience to receive the usual freshman prize of twenty-five dollars.

The identity of the winner was always kept a secret until the great night, when she was summoned from the audience to the stage and presented with the money before the entire assembly.

The readers can imagine, therefore, the uncer-

tainty and trepidation that fluttered in the hearts of our four girls as they sat together in the center of the great hall. Anne had passed through a dozen stages of emotions, both hopeful and otherwise, and had finally steeled herself to give up all thought of winning either of the prizes.

Miriam, confident and handsome, sat near them. She wore a beautiful white dress trimmed with lace, and her thick, black plaits were twisted around her head like a coronet.

"She's all dressed up to step up on the stage and get her twenty-five," whispered Nora to Jessica.

"Perhaps she already knows she's going to get it," answered Jessica doubtfully. "Perhaps Miss Leece has told her."

"If Miss Leece knew it, she would certainly have told her," answered Grace, leaning over so that Anne could not hear her; "but I feel sure Miss Thompson has managed it somehow, although I kept hoping all day she would send me a note or something. It may be she hated to tell me the bad news."

Hippy Wingate and Reddy Brooks came down the aisle in immaculate attire. David followed behind, pale and silent.

Did David suspect anything about his sister? Grace wondered. Certainly he had directly

or indirectly been the means of balking every one of Miriam's schemes for injuring Anne. Perhaps Miriam had told him she was to win the prize, and he was thinking of Anne's disappointment. All three boys paused when they saw their friends of the Christmas house party. Hippy leaned over to say:

"Hello, girls! Can you guess what has brought us here to-night, all dressed up in our best?"

"Not unless it was to show off your clothes," replied Nora.

"To see Miss Anne Pierson win the freshman prize. Simply that, and nothing more."

"But I don't expect to win it, Hippy," protested Anne.

"If you don't, you aren't the girl we took you for, then," replied Hippy. "I heard from a young person in your class that you hadn't made a mistake in six months."

"But just as many people think Miriam will win," said Anne. "Look at all the people congratulating her already."

Surely enough Miriam's friends had rallied around her at the final test, and numbers of girls and boys and grown people, too, were already prophesying victory.

Just then the audience composed itself, for the exercises were about to begin. Soft music

was heard and the graduates filed out and took their seats.

Immediately they were seated, Mrs. Gray, in a beautiful lavender silk gown and a white lace bonnet trimmed with violets, swept down the aisle, bowing and smiling right and left.

"Girls!" cried Grace delightedly, looking over her shoulder, "guess who is with our precious little Mrs. Gray?"

"Tom Gray!" cried the others in unison, just as Tom Gray himself appeared opposite them and waved his hat, regardless of the many eyes fastened upon him, for Mrs. Gray was an important personage not only at these annual assemblages, but in Oakdale itself, of which she had always been a most generous and loyal citizen.

Mrs. Gray nodded cordially when she saw the girls, but shook her head over Anne's pale, drawn little face.

As the ceremonies proceeded after the opening prayer, Anne felt herself drifting further and further away. She was a little boat on a troubled, restless sea, with the noise of the waves in her head, and only occasionally did she hear some one's voice reading a graduating essay or making a speech—she couldn't tell which. She remembered there was a piano solo, very loud and crashing, it seemed to her, and

there was a tremendous humming sound. The sea was growing very rough, she thought. A storm was brewing somewhere. Then the wind died down again, there was a complete and utter silence and she seemed to be entirely alone.

"I have great pleasure in announcing," she dimly heard a voice say, "that the annual freshman prize, so generously donated always by Mrs. Gray, is awarded this year to one of the most brilliant and remarkable pupils who has ever studied in Oakdale High School. My language, in this instance, may appear to be rather extravagant, but the pupil, who has been under the eye of the faculty for many months because of her most excellent standing, has achieved a unique success in the history of the school. I may say that she has turned in a set of examination papers absolutely perfect in every detail, and it is with real delight I announce that she has won not only the usual smaller prize of twenty-five dollars, but the premium always offered at the same time, but never before won by any pupil of this school, of one hundred dollars, for a flawless examination. I would, therefore, ask Miss Anne Pierson to come to the platform, that I may have the honor of delivering both prizes to her."

Such a shout as arose after this remarkable speech had never before been heard at a high

school graduation. The freshman class was fairly mad with joy, while Hippy and Reddy yelled themselves hoarse.

"Anne!" cried Grace. "Wake up, Anne! Are you asleep, child? Go up to the platform. Miss Thompson is waiting for you."

Tears of joy and relief were rolling down Grace's cheeks as she urged Anne to rise from her seat.

Anne stood up, half dazed, still wondering what it was all about, and made her way through a sea of faces to the platform.

"Hurrah!" roared the pupils of the High School in one voice.

"Hi-hi-hi! Hi-hi-hi! Oakdale, Oakdale, HIGH SCHOOL!"

This was an honor usually accorded only to football and baseball heroes.

When Anne reached the platform she appeared so small and plain, in her simple white muslin frock, that people looked at her wonderingly. It was not everyone in Oakdale who was familiar with the little, dark-haired girl.

"My dear," said Miss Thompson, very handsome and imposing in a gray silk dress, "I am happy to be the one to hand you these two prizes. You have worked hard and richly deserve them both. I am sure everyone in this house to-night is glad that your winter's unceasing labors are

crowned with success, and I now recommend you to take a good rest, for such prizes are only earned by earnest and hard application, and hard work carries with it, sometimes, its own penalty." (She placed special emphasis on these last words.) "You have indeed earned the right to a happy vacation."

Two bouquets were handed over the footlights at this point, one a beautiful bunch of pink roses and the other of lilies of the valley.

Mrs. Gray had sent the roses Grace felt sure. It was her custom always to send such a bouquet to the one who carried off the prize. But who had sent the lilies of the valley?

"Very likely David," Grace said to herself, watching the boy's face as Anne took the flowers from the usher.

Had he known then that his sister had lost the prize, or was his faith in Anne so great?

But something had happened.

Suddenly the waves, which for the last half hour had been roaring and tossing about Anne, seemed to submerge her completely. She felt a horrid sensation of sickness for a moment; and then down, down she sank to the bottom of nothing, carrying her flowers and prizes with her.

"She's fainted!" cried some one. "The poor, little, tired girl has fainted!"

A tall young graduate picked up the small,

limp figure and carried her off the stage as easily as if she had been a child. The closing exercises were then resumed, the benediction pronounced and the audience filed out somewhat silently.

Grace and her friends hurried around behind the scenes, where they found Mrs. Gray in the act of placing a smelling-salts bottle to Anne's nostrils, while Tom Gray and David Nesbit were cooling her temples with lumps of ice. "She is conscious at last!" exclaimed the old lady, as Anne opened her eyes. "It was entirely too much excitement for this delicate, worn-out child. Tom, order the carriage. I mean to take her straight to my own house and nurse her myself. I am the only person in this town who has time to give her all the care and attention she needs. I feel like such a lazy, good-for-nothing old woman when I see all these bright young people winning prizes and doing so many clever things."

"How you do go on, Mrs. Gray," said David. "You know very well you are the brightest, youngest and prettiest girl in Oakdale."

Anne sat up at this moment, and looked into the faces of her best friends leaning over her anxiously.

"I thought the boat capsized just as I was about to win the race," she said faintly.

"The little boat did capsize, dear," answered Mrs. Gray gently, "but not until after you had won the race. And now, if you are well enough to let this strong nephew of mine carry you, we are going to take you right home. Are all my Christmas children here?" she continued, looking about her. Hippy and Reddy had joined the group just then. "Yes, here you are. Tom and I can't take you all up in the carriage, but I want you to follow us, if your parents and guardians have no objections. I have arranged a little supper to celebrate Anne's victory. I am sorry she can't come to her own party, but she may hear all about it afterwards and the rest of you shall make merry for her."

Not long after, six young people strolled up Chapel Hill in the moonlight, talking gayly of the happy days they had spent together with Mrs. Gray; for Richards, the burglar, seemed now a sort of joke to them, and even the terrible recollection of the wolves was softened by time, and they could only laugh at poor Hippy's plight when his breath gave out and his legs refused their office.

"Oh, well," exclaimed Hippy, pretending to be much offended, "it is a very good idea to remember only the funny things and forget the dangerous ones, when all's said and done. But if I'd have had a stroke of apoplexy just as

that young lady wolf began to lick my heels, you wouldn't have been so merry over the recollection."

"Well," retorted Nora, "we would have been just about going into half mourning, by now, and that's always a cheerful thought."

"Grace," whispered Jessica, taking advantage of the talk of the others not to be overheard, "did you notice Miriam when Miss Thompson began her speech?"

"No," answered Grace, "I was too intent upon Anne to look at Miriam. Why?"

"Well," continued Jessica, "you remember that Miss Thompson mentioned no names until almost the very end of the speech?"

"Yes," answered the other; "I remember it particularly, because I kept wishing she would hurry and get to the point."

"Exactly," went on Jessica, "and Miriam thought she had won the prize."

"How do you know, Jessica? How could you tell?"

"Oh, in a hundred different ways. I could tell by the smile on her face that she took every compliment to herself. Lots of people were watching her, too, and I couldn't help feeling a little sorry for her, because she is one of those people who just can't stand losing. When Miss Thompson reached the place where she was

about to ask Anne to step up and get the prize, Miriam half rose in her seat. Mrs. Nesbit pulled her back in the nick of time. I honestly believe she would have reached the stage before Anne did, if her mother hadn't stopped her. Hippy told me they left before the benediction. I suppose Miriam was not equal to the mortification."

"I thought perhaps Miss Thompson would have mentioned her name as coming second in the contest," said Grace. "She usually does, you know. But there were good reasons, and plenty, why she shouldn't this time, I suppose. And to think, Jessica, that Miriam need never have done that dreadful thing. She would probably have passed second in the class anyway, and copying the papers didn't help her one little bit."

Mrs. Gray reported Anne to be much better. She had taken some nourishing broth and gone to bed, and she was at that moment sleeping soundly.

So there was no cause for anything but good cheer at the supper party.

And here let us leave them around Mrs. Gray's hospitable table. For, is it not better to say farewell rejoicing so that no shadows may darken the memory we shall carry with us during the long months of separation?

Before Oakdale High School welcomes her children back again, David will sail abroad with his mother and sister; Grace and Anne will set off for the country to visit Grace's grandmother; the others and their families will scatter to various summer resorts, while Mrs. Gray will seek a cool spot in the mountains.

However, in the next volume, which will be entitled, "GRACE HARLOWE'S SOPHOMORE YEAR AT HIGH SCHOOL; Or, the Record of the Girl Chums in Work and Athletics," we shall again meet the four girls and their friends. This book, the record of the girl chums in athletics, tells of the exciting rivalries of the sophomore and junior basketball teams, culminating in a final hard-fought battle. Again Grace Harlowe distinguishes herself by her bravery and good judgment, and again Miriam Nesbit will do her best to thwart her at every point. And we may learn what Anne Pierson did with the prize money.

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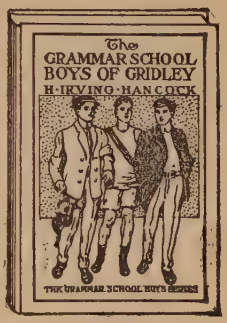

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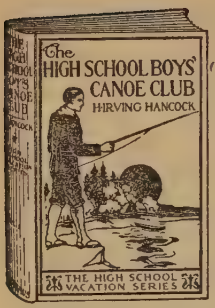

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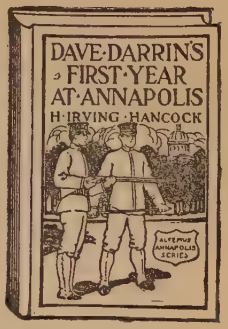

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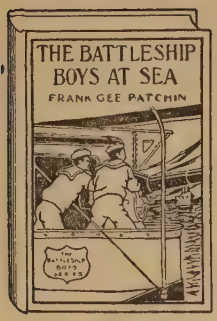

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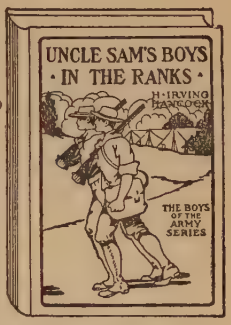

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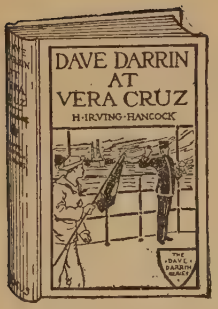

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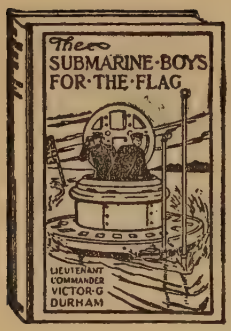

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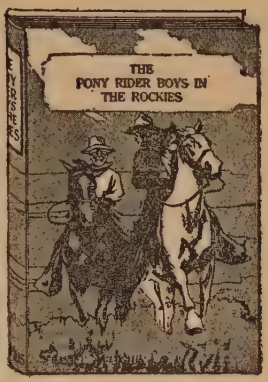

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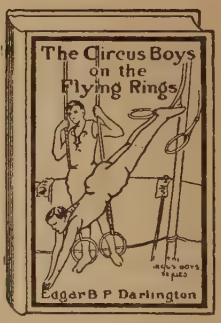

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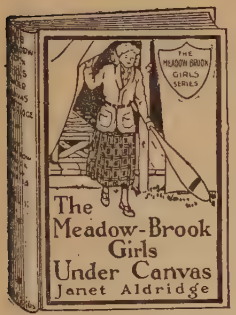

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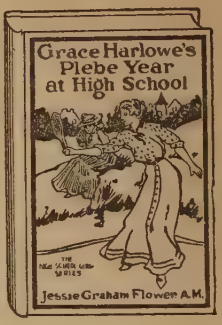

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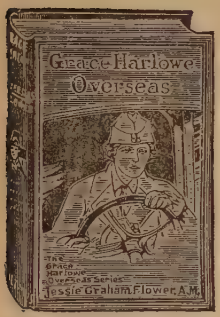

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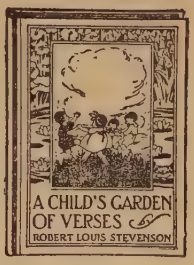

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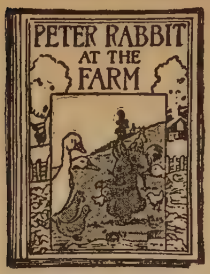

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